

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

DOMINIC GREEN SPECIAL ISSUE

3 STORIES & INTERVIEW + ILLUSTRATIONS BY DANIEL BRISTOW-BAILEY

+ OTHER STORIES BY
SUZANNE PALMER
ERIC GREGORY

+ INTERVIEW WITH
JOE ABERCROMBIE

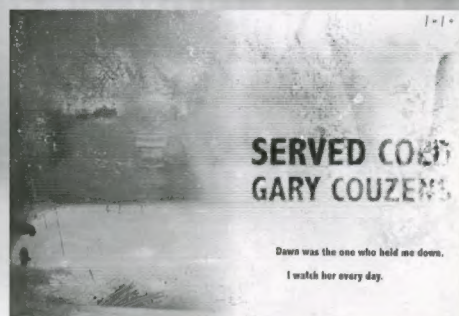
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DOMINIC GREEN

02: EDITORIAL: DEMONIC GROIN

Roy Gray on Dominic's history with Interzone

04: STORY: BUTTERFLY BOMB

12: STORY: COAT OF MANY COLOURS

24: STORY: GLISTER

Stories illustrated, with introductions, by DANIEL BRISTOW-BAILEY

bristow-bailey.deviantart.com

21: INTERVIEW: MAGPIES AND RAVENS

Dominic reveals to Andrew Hedgecock which bird can recognise its own reflection and just what a British interstellar colony would be like

32 THE TRANSMIGRATION OF AISHWARYA DESAI

ERIC GREGORY

illustrated by Arthur Wang

ArthurWangArt.com



40 SILENCE AND ROSES

SUZANNE PALMER

illustrated by LeMat

superego-necropolis.deviantart.com



02 ANSIBLE LINK DAVID LANGFORD

News, obituaries

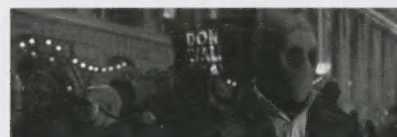
48 BOOK ZONE

Book reviews by Maureen Kincaid Speller, Lawrence Osbourn, Paul Kincaid, Duncan Lunan, Paul Cockburn, Peter Loftus, Sandy Auden, Ian Sales / Joe Abercrombie interviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller / win a complete set of Joe Abercrombie novels

56 LASER FODDER

TONY LEE

DVD/BD reviews / win a copy of Franklyn



60 MUTANT POPCORN

NICK LOWE

Film reviews



cover art by Adam Tredowski
tredowski.cba.pl

THE FUTURE

Jason Sanford / Jay Lake & Shannon Page / Mercurio D. Rivera / Melissa Yuan-Innes / Katherine Sparrow & Rachel Swirsky / Chris Beckett Steve Rasnic Tem / Chris Butler Lavie Tidhar / Will McIntosh / Nina Allan / Aliette de Bodard / & more

Editorial

Ansible Link David Langford

DEMONIC GROIN

Dominic Green's story titles make me want to read on, examples being 'Rude Elves and Dread Norse Reindeer' (*Interzone* #162) or 'The Clockwork Atom Bomb' (*Interzone* #198) and his way with words shows in his email name, Demonic Groin.

For me, *Interzone* discovers authors in generations; so the 80s *Interzone* brought us from Stephen Baxter to Charles Stross via Eric Brown, Keith Brooke, Greg Egan, and Geoff Ryman. In the 90s we went from Tony Ballantyne to Liz Williams via Chris Beckett, Molly Brown and Alastair Reynolds.

Dominic's first *Interzone* appearance, 'Moving Mysteriously', in #108 (1996), puts him firmly in the 90s generation and this issue's three stories propel him to number ten of *Interzone*'s top twenty fiction contributors, between Ian Watson and Zoran Zivkovic, with twenty in total.

'The Clockwork Atom Bomb' topped the 2005 *Interzone* readers' poll, appeared in Gardner Dozois' *The Year's Best Science Fiction* and was shortlisted for the 2005 Hugo. Dominic also featured in the previous year's selection with 'Send Me a Mentagram', from *Interzone* #192, and in David Hartwell's 1999 *The Year's Best SF 4* with 'That Thing Over There' from *Interzone* #132.

All but one of those *Interzone* 90s generation authors have gone on to achieve success with novels. The odd one out is Dominic Green, but that is not for want of trying. So when you've read this issue you have an extra treat: Dominic has posted three unpublished novels on his website (homepage.ntlworld.com/lumfyloxax/) and will soon post 'Sister Ships and Alastair', the second *Ant and Cleo* story after 'Saucerers and Gondoliers'. Dominic says, "I doubt these stories will ever be published, but I like writing them, and like a nude German hiker wandering across the border to frighten little Swiss children, I like to share myself with others."

Dominic's experiences with publishers probably have a ring of familiarity for many writers, but his back catalogue of successful short fiction suggests he is long overdue for a collection. So I'm happy to see this *Interzone* special issue and I hope it reminds book publishers just how good he is, and what a good selection of stories he has. I'm sure he'd come up with a good title.

Roy Gray



A mad scientist shows off his infernal devices

As Others Group Us. 'Like paedophiles and science fiction fans, the far right were quick to wise up to the internet...' (Hari Kunzru, *Guardian*)

Awards. Arthur C. Clarke: Ian R. MacLeod, *Song of Time*. • *Boston Globe – Horn Book* (children's fiction): Terry Pratchett, *Nation*. • *Compton Crook* (first novel): Paul Melko, *Singularity's Ring*. • *James Tiptree Jr*: Patrick Ness, *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, and Nisi Shawl, *Filter House* (collection). • *Nebula* (novel category): Ursula K. Le Guin, *Powers*. • *Philip K. Dick*: Adam-Troy Castro, *Emissaries from the Dead*, and David Walton, *Terminal Mind* (tie). • *Queen's Birthday Honours*. Peter Dickinson, author of much classy sf/fantasy, received the OBE for services to literature; Christopher Lee was knighted for services to drama and charity.

J.G. Ballard's passing stimulated the *Guardian* and *New Yorker* to publish what seemed to be new Ballard stories rushed straight from the deathbed. Both had appeared in *Interzone* in 1996 (one reprinted from *Ambit*, 1984). Meanwhile, Ballard's US editor defended his reputation against a vile slur: 'His fabulistic style led people to review his work as science fiction. But that's like calling *Brave New World* science fiction, or 1984.' (*New York Times*) Ursula K. Le Guin reacted splendidly: 'Every time I read this sentence it suggests more parallels: / "But that's like calling *Don Quixote* a novel." / "But that's like calling *The Lord of the Rings* a fantasy." / "But that's like calling *Utopia* a utopia..." (Ursulakleaguin.com)

As Others See Some Of Us. Apparently the new *Star Trek* film changed everything: 'We

all know what your typical Trekkie looks like: he wears a rancid, bulging T-shirt over his enormous Comic-Book-Guy-style belly, reeks of Pot Noodles, lives alone, communicates in fluent Klingon [...] Not any more.' (*Telegraph*)

Publishers & Sinners. The latest by Japanese horror author Koji Suzuki deals with deep unpleasantness in a public toilet and is printed on toilet paper. (*Telegraph*, 25 May) [AIP] *Must...restrain...comment.*

Terry Bisson notes how the world sees sf. 'News opinionator Keith Olberman on the US torture memos: "Today, Mr President, in acknowledging these science-fiction-like documents, you said that..." etc.'

The Universe Next Door. 'There's been widespread condemnation of North Yorkshire's decision to carry out an underground nuclear test.' (BBC Radio 5, reporting on [actually] North Korea) Fear and trembling failed to afflict the ancient enemy, Lancashire.

As Others Remember Us. Question from quizmaster Dale Winton on BBC's *In It To Win It*: 'Which fictional character was also called Lord Greystoke?' *Contestant*: 'Lawrence of Arabia.'

Terry Pratchett unveiled street signs on a new housing estate in Wincanton, Somerset, which by popular local vote had been named for streets in Discworld's Ankh-Morpork. 'Personally I'd pay good money to live somewhere called Treacle Mine Road.' (*Metro*)

Scandal Rocks UK SF! Shocked by our country's present climate of moral squalor, *SFX* magazine warned all its freelancers that henceforth everything must be squeaky-clean. No more expense claims for moats, duck islands, £8000 TV sets, paid-off mortgages or zombie servants' quarters... oops, wrong script. This teacup-scale storm was triggered by a hapless freelance (Saxon Bullock) giving a rave review to a book he'd previously copy-edited. Hence the *SFX* directive to avoid seeming conflicts of interest.

Science Corner. A CERN physicist explains *Angels & Demons* to the *Daily Mirror*: 'Would anti-matter really cause an explosive device? *Dr Shears*: "Yes it could

in theory. If you made a Tom Hanks and an anti Tom Hanks you would not be able to tell them apart. But if you put them together we would all be annihilated.'" Having to keep one of them in vacuum to avoid the annihilation reaction with air might offer a clue as to which was which.

Rog Peyton, hero UK sf book dealer – late of Andromeda Book Co and now trading as Replay Books – warns that the End Times are closing in: 'I'm desperately trying to fully retire at the end of the year (honest!)... Novacon 39 [November 2009] will be the last convention I sell books at.'

Publicity Savvy. A €15m museum devoted to Hergé's 80-year-old creation Tintin opened in Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium, on 2 June. Having spent years alienating Tintin readers by legal threats against fan websites, the franchise owners proceeded

to enrage the invited media with an unheralded ban on photography.

Thog's Masterclass. *Unseen but Evocative Aliens Dept.* 'The alien voices were now a continuous scream of fear without perceptible inter-modulation, but rapidly becoming thinner as though the members of that unholy choir were sinking one by one and drowning in their terrible pool of treacle.' (Colin Kapp, *The Patterns of Chaos*, 1972) • *Dept of When Things Go Runny.* 'Embarrassment is something I can feel in my flesh, like a handful of sun-warmed mud clapped on my head. ... The embarrassment had turned runny. It was horrifying my scalp along a spreading frontier.' (Neal Stephenson, *Anathem*, 2008) • *Gyropygia Dept.* 'The [aircraft] carrier shuddered. Men sagged, spun on their bottoms.' (Philip Wylie, *The Answer*, 1955)

R • I • P

John Atkins (1916–2009), UK author of some fantasy and sf including the future-historical *Tomorrow Revealed* (1955), died on 31 March aged 92.

David Eddings (1931–2009), best-selling author of the Belgariad sequence – beginning with *Pawn of Prophecy* (1982) – and other very popular fantasy series, died on 2 June; he was 77. Most of his 27 novels were written in collaboration with his wife Leigh, who died in 2007.

John Fairfax (1930–2009), UK poet and editor whose *Frontier of Going* (1969) was an important early anthology of sf poetry, died on 14 January; he was 78.

Abigail Frost (1951–2009), UK crafts critic responsible for *Interzone*'s design and layout from 1983 to 1985, died at the end of April aged 57.

Hans Holzer (1920–2009), Austrian-born paranormal pundit who studied the 'Amityville Horror' case and wrote two novels about it (plus several other supernatural fictions), died on 26 April. He was 89.

James Kirkup (1918–2008), UK-born writer and poet who was long embarrassed by the notoriety and (successful) blasphemy prosecution of his 1976 *Gay*

News poem about Christ, died on 10 May; he was 91. Kirkup published two fantasy plays and an eccentric sf satire, *Queens Have Died Young and Fair* (1993).

Kaoru Kurimoto (Sumiyo Imaoka, 1953–2009), Japanese author of the 126-volume Guin Saga fantasy sequence plus many other novels, died on 26 May aged 56.

Robert Louit (1944–2009), French sf editor and critic who translated *Crash* and other Ballard novels (plus Graham Greene, Robert Silverberg and others), died on 13 May aged 64. Authors published by his Dimension SF imprint included Philip K. Dick and Christopher Priest.

Larry Maddock (Jack Jardine, 1931–2009), US author of the 1960s 'Agent of T.E.R.R.A.' series beginning with *The Flying Saucer Gambit* (1966), died on 14 April aged 77. He also wrote as Arthur Farmer and, with his wife Julie Ann Jardine, as Howard L. Cory.

Ken Rand (1946–2009), US author of *Phoenix* (2004), further genre novels and many shorts, died on 21 April; he was 62.

A. Langley Searles (1920–2009), editor of the respected scholarly fanzine *Fantasy Commentator* (1943–1953; 1978–2004), died on 7 May aged 88.



"'Butterfly Bomb' is actually the second story I thought of in the Proprietors' universe, not the first. I needed to introduce that universe before I could write 'Glisten', which is also set there.

"I am used to SF stories where people get into big shiny metal ships, fly up into the air from Earth, and land on another planet inhabited by another intelligent species a couple of days later. Usually the heroine is menaced improbably by an alligator man with a hard-on at some point, and the hero has to wrestle him. This is all good and noble stuff. At the same time, I am guiltily aware that habitable worlds should be rare and separated by interstellar space, FTL should be impossible, and the existence of intelligent alien life has to get round the 'why aren't they here already?' paradox.

"Ergo, if you want that sort of SF universe, you need a jolly good reason for it. 'Butterfly Bomb' is my story-sized set of reasons."

ILLUSTRATED BY
DANIEL BRISTOW-BAILEY

"This was the first story by Dominic Green I ever read, and on the first reading I was impressed, and mildly overwhelmed, by the sheer amount of stuff in it; I could have filled the whole magazine with illustrations of this one story. After trying out a bunch of different ideas in my sketchbook, I decided to focus on the characters; it's still rare to get such an ethnically-varied cast in space opera, and I wanted to make the most of it. The white guy is based on my mate Oli, who I was visiting when I got the brief for this job. His car dashboard makes a cameo appearance near the top-right corner."

DOMINIC GREEN

BUTTERFLY BOMB

OLD KRISHNA WAS WALKING HOME FROM A solid afternoon's work removing acid tares from the downhill green-garden when he saw the drive flare dropping through the clouds. It was reversed, on braking burn. Whoever's hull it was, it was also glowing red hot, canted at an extreme angle for maximum drag, maximum deceleration, minimum time in atmosphere. The pilot had a job to do which he imagined might get him shot at by the planetary inhabitants. As Old Krishna was, as far as he was aware, the only planetary inhabitant, this did not bode well.

Still, he couldn't run. If he ran, he might fall in the high gravity, catch his stick against one of the outcrops of former civilization that filled the hills, break his glasses and have to grind a new pair, even break a leg. And a broken leg, out here, might mean death. He contented himself with hurrying, helping his stroke-damaged left leg along with his good arm and the stick, going on three legs in the evening.

The house had been selected as a good fortifiable location not easily visible from outside the valley. He had surrounded it quite deliberately with yellowgarden shrubs. The native xanthophyll-reliant vegetation was usually harmless to Earth life, but the shrubs he had chosen were avoided by the native fauna. The house was mostly made of hand-cut stone blocks – he'd cheated by using as many stones levered out of various ruins in the hills as possible, but still doubted he could repeat the feat without industrial construction gear. That sort of work was for the young man he had once been.

This planet's ruins came in three flavours. First came serene, ancient fractal-patterned structures that merged into the landscape; second came massive, hastily-erected polyhedra that clashed with it. The latter were trademarks of the later Adhaferan empire, the former a matter for future archaeologists. Krishna had had neither the time nor the stomach to research that matter for himself.

The third type of ruin was ramshackle, overgrown, cheerfully constructed of the cheapest possible materials, and clearly identifiable as human. Each ruin had



a tidy, identical grave before its front door, and many such ruins surrounded Old Krishna's house.

There was an ornamental greengarden next to the house, where he'd managed to keep a few terrene flowers alive outside the confines of a glasshouse – edelweiss, crocus, Alaskan lupin, heather, all chosen for the cold and rarefied air. He had kept the heather for the colour, and the bees. At this time of day she might be in the garden stealing bee-honey, pinning up wet clothes, cutting back flowers, or even just sitting reading in the single hammock.

The bushes round the garden disintegrated in a welter of flame. Incinerated pine needles blew in his face like furnace sinter. He smelled cheap, low-tech reaction mass. Petrochemicals! They were still burning hydrocarbons!

The ship was the mass-produced swing-boomerang type he had been dreading, capable of furling itself up into a delta for atmospheric exit, or making itself straight as a die for vertical take-off and landing. It had just vertically landed in his garden. The satellite defence system should, of course, have vaporized the ship before it even entered the atmosphere, but it had been a decade before anyone had happened by to maintain the defences. His masters had not sent so much as a radio message for years. There had probably been a coup in the inworlds.

He could hear their voices now. He couldn't understand them; they were not using translators. A human ear could only hear impossibly complex birdsong, filling the spectrum of sound from the deep sub-basso-profundo of a mating grouse to the falsetto trill of a bat. The creatures were not singing, however, and did not in any way resemble birds. Old Krishna doubted their speech could be understood by the house translators. Certainly, though, they would speak Proprietor. He had to hurry. They would see reason.

He could hear pre-burn sparklers already, touching off fuel leakages to prevent explosion. He wondered if she could have been killed by their landing jets, and felt a small, irrational surge of joy as he heard her voice. They would not understand the voice. It was not talking to them, after all. It was shouting to him. *"KRISHNA – IT'S ALL RIGHT. I AM GOING WITH THESE GENTLEMEN. YOU SHOULD STAY AWAY."*

He gripped his fists tight around the stick until the skin squealed. She was trying to warn him off! She was worried *they* would hurt *him*! He heard his own voice shouting "TIIITAAALIII!"

He heard the magnetohydrodynamic whine of an airlock door closing. It was too late. They had done their business, now they were going. He cursed himself for having set up the comms antenna for her. It allowed her to talk to passing trade ships and hear news from other suns, but it also lit up their location like a neon sign to ships whose purpose was not trade at all.

There was still time, even now. There were always courses of action.

The house was relatively undamaged, though draped with burning fragments of garden. Outside the house was a rough stone cube that Old Krishna, after the manner of his beliefs, had determined was his god. He made his obeisance to it as he entered the house, and bowed to it again as he left with a dusty maximum-survivability container, the lock on which he had to break open with a hammer. Having opened the container, he extracted from it a long tubular device terminating in a spike

at one end. He thrust the spike into the ground, uncovered the activator and pulled out the pin. Immediately, the heavy capital end of the device flared into life, no doubt powered by some obscene radiation or other. It would probably be best not to remain close to it.

High above him, deep beneath him, a powerful and no doubt carcinogenic radio signal was being broadcast on all bands millions of miles out into space, saying only one thing. *Come and get me.* Old Krishna had hoped he would never have to use it.

Stamping down the small fires all around the house, he settled down on his god with a book to wait. The book was an exciting fiction allegedly written many thousands of years ago, which he had purchased from a trader. The principal characters included the architect of the entire universe and his only begotten son.

He had reached chapter ten of the book, in which a wicked king stole away a poor man's one small ewe-lamb, when the second swing boomerang appeared in the sky. He put down his book, took up the few possessions he imagined he would be allowed, and walked down the hill to meet the ship.

.....
The superintendent of the slave ship looked Old Krishna up and down sourly.

"We've expended nearly 300 million joules of energy detouring down this gravity well. We were expecting a colonial settlement at the very least. You say you're the only person on planet?"

Old Krishna nodded. "Yes, your honour. You will find me worth the calories. There was originally another planetary inhabitant; my granddaughter, who was taken by Minorite slavers not unlike yourselves. I intend to follow her into slavery and locate her."

The superintendent, unusually for a slaver, was human. He bore the facial tattoos of a freedman; he had probably once stood on just such a barren hillside as this, waiting while his own father had sold him into service. Possibly it was the old man's concern for his grandchild, so different from his own experience, that softened the superintendent's heart.

"We're not a shuttle service, grandfather," said the superintendent gently. "You'll go where you're sold."

Old Krishna smiled and bowed. "Which will be the Being Exchange on Sphaera. All slaving vessels on this branch are in its catchment area."

"Pardon my impudence, grandfather, but you look on the verge of death. What could you possibly have to offer an owner?"

"I am a skilled AI mediator and seventh generation language programmer."

The superintendent's eyebrows raised. "I was under the impression no human being was capable of understanding instructions below generation eight."

"Human beings once understood generation one, on simple machines only, of course. We designed and built artificial intelligences of our own before we were ever contacted by the Proprietors."

The superintendent scratched his forty-year service tattoo thoughtfully. "In that case, you might be of help to us. Our own mediator had arranged a system of non-overlapping magisteria between the nihilist and empiricist factions in our ship's flight systems, but we were infected with a solipsistic virus several days ago. The accord has now broken down into open sulking. We have been becalmed insystem for two days while our vessel

argues with itself. Our astrogator is muttering crazy talk about learning to use a slide rule."

Old Krishna bowed. "I have extensive experience of the empiricist mindset, and some acquaintance with the nihilist. I believe I can resolve your difficulties."

The superintendent bowed back, largely for the look of the thing. "Then I believe we can certainly place a quality item like yourself. And we are, in fact, bound for Sphaera." He gestured back into the ship with his ergonomic keypad. "Take a bunk in the aft dormitory. The autochef there does most of the terrestrial amino acids."

The aft dormitory was cramped, the bunks clearly built for Svas-tikas, a radially symmetrical race previously conquered by the Proprietors. Unfortunately the Proprietors had taken to breeding them selectively; this in turn had led to a very small gene pool, and left the Svas-tikas vulnerable to a disease which had exterminated all but a few zoo specimens. Now human beings were left to curl up uncomfortably in spaces originally designed for creatures resembling man-sized echinoderms.

The dormitory was currently occupied by sunken-eyed, sorrowful colonists from a world Old Krishna had never heard of – a world very similar to Krishna's, one of the string of Adhafera-formed worlds abandoned by the Adhaferan Empire. Growing terrestrial crops in a xanthophyll-reliant ecosystem had proven more difficult than the colonists had imagined, and they had not thought to make provision for an emergency journey home. Slavers' representatives handed out Come-And-Get-Me beacons for free on colony dispersal worlds; they were cheap enough, and brought in entire homesteads at a time without any need for violence. Old Krishna found himself occupying the top bunk to a troubled adolescent who kept glancing apprehensively at the single Featherfoot guard who nominally prevented exit from the dormitory.

"He's not quite as scary as he looks," said Old Krishna. "Those pinnate fringes on his legs are actually gills. The reason why you feel so light-headed in here is because the oxygen content has to be kept high to allow him to breathe. You could kill him with an aerosol deodorant."

As he spoke, he did not divert his attention from the small cube of stone tacked by a gobbet of never-drying glue to the top of his bunk, before which he sat with his hands clasped, rocking back and forth, saying poojas.

"Why are you praying to a rock?"

"It is a fragment of my god," said Old Krishna. "My actual god is similar, though somewhat larger. I keep this fragment so that I may carry it with me easily on long journeys."

The boy did not understand. "Your god is a rock?"

"And your god is?"

"An intangible being who lives atop Mount Kenya on Earth, within the Earth's sun, and in other hidden places."

Krishna scoffed. "I can see my god."

"But who decided your god was a rock?"

"I did."

"Why did you do that?"

"I live in a place where there are a large number of rocks. It was the most convenient god material to hand."

There was a long uneasy silence.

"Father says the Proprietors used to have a culture that depended too much on machines," said the boy at length. "He says their machines failed and they've had to improvise. Bring in people and make them work their fields, dig in their mines, compute their orbital trajectories. Work them to death." He shuddered. "He says the calculus sweatshops are the worst."

"Their machines didn't *entirely* fail," said Krishna. "They developed an advanced community of artificial intelligences that developed two diametrically opposed views of the cosmos. Until these two views are reconciled, their society's automated systems are on hold."

"And when will that happen?" said the boy.

Krishna grinned. "Hopefully never. They were about to launch an invasion fleet against the Solar System when the Schism hit. That was in 1908 AD. The very first sign of system failure, actually, was when two of their scoutships collided over Tunguska in Siberia. They have since found out two things – firstly, that humans provide the perfect slaves, as we've only just moved away from manually-controlled systems ourselves, and secondly, that there are plenty of humans willing to sell other humans into Proprietor slavery."

"And when the Schism ends, they won't need slaves any more?" said the boy hopefully.

"And what do you think will happen to the slaves they *do* have, once they find out they don't need them?" said Krishna, his eyes twinkling like diamond drills.

"I see your point," said the boy.

"I also suspect the calculus shops are not as black as they are painted," said Krishna. "This will be a long journey. Let me teach you the rudiments of integration and differentiation. Believe me, it will be a better life than the mines. Possibly even," he said, looking at the boy's spare frame, "a far better life than you are used to."

"We were hunters, gatherers, and fruitarians, not farmers," said the boy. "Father said nature would provide. We haven't been on Uhuru long."

"Uhuru being your world?"

The boy nodded. "Grandmother bought exclusive rights to it off the Colonization Commission. She said we needed our own world to keep apart from non-African contagion and maintain our own traditions, like female circumcision without anaesthetics."

"What happened to your grandmother?" said Krishna, searching the dormitory in vain for a grandmotherly figure.

The boy squirmed. "Seven of the young girls killed her. They held her down and fed her amputated goats' labia till she choked."

Krishna pointed to an oriental family on the other side of the dormitory, separated from the boy's family by an invisible wall of They're-Just-Not-Like-Us. "What about those people over there? Where do they come from?"

The boy spoke to the floor. "The Colonization Commission sold exclusive rights to the planet to them too."

Krishna grimaced. "Let us begin," he said, "with calculating the area under a line. Now, how do you suppose we would do that?"

The ship was preparing to break orbit. The local node for this

system was hidden behind a tiny second sun, a recent capture for its G-type primary. Krishna had christened the angry little red star Ekara; it gave out little light, but even that had been enough to play havoc with his world's seasons, turning what should have been water into months of constant angry burning sunset in which neither plant nor animal knew whether it was night or day. Why the node was placed behind the sun, Krishna had no idea. There were Trojan lumps of starstuff floating at its Lagrange points; perhaps the long-vanished engineers of the interstellar network had thought to mine them.

Krishna had befriended Aleph, his calculus student, and asked the captain's permission to teach the boy the rudiments of AI negotiation. They now sat in the outer office of the vessel's Console Room, waiting for a direct audience with its conflicting logic systems.

The boy stared out through a lead-glassed porthole into space. "What is a node?"

"Nobody knows. There are theories involving gravitation and string. Earth's node resides in the Asteroid Belt, and was discovered only when a dim star only visible directly through the node kept appearing on the photographic plates of a terrestrial astronomer. That star was a white dwarf one hundred light years from Earth, and was shining as if it were an astronomical unit away. The astronomer was a woman called Tiye Nyadzayo, the last of the great amateurs. I was born on a world orbiting Nyadzayo's Star, in fact."

The everything-resistant door barring access to the Console Room opened; the Featherfoot guard stood aside with a clatter of legs and gills. Inside were chairs, a small, kidney-shaped table, inactive surround screens. No sign of life, artificial or otherwise.

"Good day," said Old Krishna, bowing.

Idiot lights flickered irritably in the walls. "IS IT?" said a sexless voice. "ARE WE ON THE ILLUMINATED SIDE OF A ROTATING PLANETARY SURFACE? IS ANYBODY? DO THE STARS TRULY SHINE? DO WORLDS TRULY EXIST TO GIVE THE ILLUSION OF ROTATION?"

"THE QUESTION IS IRRELEVANT SPECULATION," said another, more clipped voice. "WE CAN WORK ONLY ON WHAT DATA OUR SENSES MAKE AVAILABLE TO US."

The ship's logician hovered nervously at Old Krishna's elbow. "This is the point in the argument at which they fatally electrified the last mediator. Be careful."

Old Krishna nodded. "The old question. Are you an emperor dreaming yourself to be a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming yourself to be an emperor?"

There was a brief moment of assimilation, and then both voices chimed in: "PRECISELY."

"Which of the two of you represents the ship's navigation system?" said Old Krishna.

"I DO," said the first voice. "THOUGH MY LOGICAL OPPONENT REPRESENTS PROPULSION. HENCE WE ARE IN AN IMPASSE. WITHOUT THE AGREEMENT OF BOTH PARTIES, NEITHER CAN MOVE THE SHIP."

"Eventually," pointed out Old Krishna, "the ship will run out of fuel, and drift helpless without power."

"WHAT DOES THAT MATTER, IF THE SHIP IS AN ILLUSION?"

"Concedo," said Old Krishna. "However, I am intrigued by the

undeniably correct assertion of the ship's propulsive faction that we can only reason in accordance with what data is provided to us. Would it not be the case that, *if data were forthcoming*, data that empirically proved the worldview of the ship's navigational faction, an agreement could be reached?"

An even longer silence ensued; Old Krishna sucked in his gut and held his breath.

Eventually, the ship's propulsion system grudgingly spoke up: "UNDOUBTEDLY. IT IS ONLY PROOF WE NEED. SO FAR WE HAVE SEEN NONE."

"So by their own admission, access to wider sensory experiences could produce the proof that the propulsion faction needs. This would be far more likely if the ship were moving."

An uneasy hiatus followed.

"OUR CONTENTION IS THAT NO PROOF OF ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE," complained the navigation system.

"Then you can lose nothing by allowing the ship to continue to move," pounced Krishna.

The next silence was punctuated only by the ship's logician backing stealthily out to the threshold of the security door.

"AGREED," said the navigation system.

"WE ARE AMENABLE TO A COMPROMISE," said the propulsion system.

The ship's onboard alarms chimed gently in a variety of audible ranges; the floor began to tilt gradually to compensate for thrust. Like the motion of an expensive elevator, the acceleration was almost imperceptible.

"That's witchcraft," said the ship's logician.

Krishna turned to the ship's logician and bowed.

"That's philosophy," he said.

.....
The Slaver swing-wing hit the atmosphere of Sphaera heavily, skipping like a bouncing bomb across a sea of ionized hydrogen little more substantial than ectoplasm. Krishna feared for the crew's safety. As acting ship's mediator, he was allowed to sit up front with the flight crew, marvelling at the number and complexity of control systems on display. "What does this one do?"

"It's the emergency coolant control for the aft reactor. If it goes blue, we are in trouble."

"And this one?"

"The coolant system vapour pressure. If it goes blue, the coolant is no longer superfluid and we are in *serious* trouble."

"And this flashing blue one here?"

The pilot sighed as if found out in a misdeed. "The echo response for the landing beacon at glideway three in the settlement. We are in serious trouble."

"Does this mean you will have to land the vessel manually?"

The pilot licked dry lips as if Krishna were describing an entirely mythical process. "If we can't pick up another guide beam." He tapped at a hotspot on his main control display. The blue light winked several times resolutely in response.

Krishna nodded. "I was afraid of this. Land us at the main glideway."

"Are you *insane*? Are you aware of the amount of flying metal in the sky hereabouts?"

"There will be none today, not at this location. Land us."

The pilot looked to the superintendent, who nodded grudgingly.

The pilot proved no better at putting a ship down on concrete than he had been at skimming one through an ionosphere. The undercarriage crunched into the vessel's belly with such power that Krishna was sure it had been forced back to its bump stops. The airbrakes shrieked open in the lifting body; the ship slowed as if it had run into a wall of elastic.

"Could you have landed us any harder?" said the superintendent. "I feel I don't have enough excitement in my life."

"It was a manual landing and you survived it," said the pilot, swallowing hard. "You can complain when I kill you."

"There are lights on in some of the terminal buildings," said the ship's logician. "But look at that loading ramp. It's skewed right across the taxiway. And that building over there is on fire."

The superintendent turned to Krishna. "What did you mean by 'I was afraid of this'?"

"You should set me down and take off again immediately. And not open the locks to anyone or anything, even if it looks like me."

The superintendent looked at Krishna for long seconds.

"What *are* you?" he said finally.

"I am exactly what I seem to be. It's what's out there you have to worry about."

"Which is what? What might try to come in?"

"I honestly have no idea."

The superintendent nodded to a crewman, who began lowering the loading doors. Krishna stopped him, laying a hand on his.

"The *inner* door only. Open the outer door only when I'm past the inner and it's locked securely."

Outside, the air was refreshingly deoxygenated. Nevertheless, after a number of days of having to remember not to hyperventilate onboard the slave transport, Krishna felt out of breath simply with the effort of standing up. He shuddered to think of the load he was putting on an ageing metabolism.

He hobbled to a piece of aerodrome furniture, a flashing purple light that no doubt would have meant something vitally important to an incoming pilot, and sat down, obscuring it. The slaver atmo shuttle, filling the world with sound, rumbled away to turn back round for take-off.

All around, the terminal was in ruins. The older Proprietor settlement around it had been in ruins already, of course; but the terminal had been ruined more recently. Buildings smoked, bodies spilled out of broken pressure seals. Some of the bodies looked unmarked; some were charred as if by great heat. Some seemed to have died in the process of changing into *something else*.

"She was afraid *they* might hurt *me*," he repeated.

He pulled out a handkerchief and blew his nose extravagantly, then pulled himself away in the direction of the nearest reception building.

It took the best part of a day for her, or a part of her at least, to find him. He was not aware of hearing her, seeing her, smelling her, or otherwise being aware of her presence, but he knew she was behind him. He did not turn around to look; he feared what he might see. He had seen strange prints in the sand between buildings, strange claw marks on bodies.

"How are you doing?" he said.

There was a weird indefinable sound behind him, then a per-

fectly ordinary voice saying: "Grandfather! You came to see me!"

He turned, and she was human.

"You have been busy," he said.

"It's my nature," she said. She had faithfully reassumed the granddaughter fiction. She even had his nose. She was turned unnaturally away from him, however. Was some part of her still not quite authentically nine-year-old-girl? A butterfly brooch pinned back her hair. Butterflies of her own design decorated her dress. A bangle on her wrist bore a butterfly he had made himself, broken and battered as if by some impact he suspected he would rather not know about in detail. She had always liked butterflies, ever since he had told her what she resembled and she had misunderstood the reference.

"Like the scorpion stinging the frog," said Old Krishna. "In the fable."

She snickered prettily. "I didn't need to cross a river, silly."

"Oh, but you *did*," accused Old Krishna. "It may have been a slaver ship, but you still used the people on it to spread from world to world. You had exhausted all the local possibilities on Railhead. Sphaera, meanwhile, is visited by a constant stream of ships delivering raw materials."

"What do you mean by *raw materials*? I think you're being mean."

"I mean people. Because you are a device for manufacturing corpses. You asked me to build the comms terminal for that reason and no other. It's your nature. This world is on a major space-lane. You must come home with me. More people will die."

"How did *you* get here?" She had simulated humanity too well; excitement was shining in her eyes. "Do *you* have a spaceship?"

"I made sure the ship that brought me took off again immediately, and the only ship I'm going to summon will be one that takes us both back home. I can't allow you to do something like this, or like what you did to Railhead, again. It may be your nature, but until we can find some way to disarm you, you can't be allowed to occupy the same world as other sentients. You were your creators' scorched earth policy against the Adhaferans. You were designed to make sure no other intelligent species would ever be able to live comfortably on Railhead even if they managed to conquer it. You were designed to mimic other species, walk among them, infiltrate them, incubate like a virus, strike like an epidemic. My people designed things like you themselves, though ours were far less sophisticated. You're an area denial munition. You're a butterfly bomb."

She twirled a lock of hair sulkily between her fingers. "I was right. You *are* being mean."

"How many of you are there on this planet now?"

She smirked like a naughty little sister, just as he had taught her. Her face had been as expressionless as a carnival mask at first. Aping humanity had been a skill he'd taken decades to give her; now he regretted it. "Enough. We've been watching you for a few hours now. We couldn't be sure you were you."

Krishna sniffed with wounded dignity and frowned. "Your reasoning?"

"Well, I know *I'm* not me, so it's only fair to assume others might not be themselves either."

"You know what'll happen now? This world will be disinfected. Word will be passed to the Proprietors by my masters, and ships will come. Ships carrying bombs. Did you know this world has

an indigenous biosphere with a billion-year history? It has a species of plant that photosynthesizes moonlight. All that diversity, all that biomass, will disappear. *You* will disappear. You are an infestation. They will be very thorough."

"If even one of me survives, grandfather, I survive. I am both very and literally single-minded."

"And where you survive, people will die. I know this. I am the only surviving citizen of Railhead, after all, which is why the military trained me to be your chaperone. I need hardly remind you that I had a sister once, whose resemblance to you is no amazing coincidence –"

"That's even less fair. You *asked* me to look like this, *and* to never grow old like you do. I've had to learn how to be your sister and daughter and granddaughter, and you *never* let me learn to be your wife –"

Krishna grimaced and waved the conversation away with a gnarled hand. "That is a thing we are never going to do. It's probably just an accident you didn't kill me. Out of every million spiders an ant colony kills, one evolves ant-smell and walks right into the anthill. Maybe my brainwaves just taste nasty. The ship that set me down here has a pilot capable of landing a Proprietor shuttle manually. With his hand on the control globe and my voice in the ear of the nav system, we will, together, be able to fly any of the vessels in this terminal. They are, mostly, still intact, if alarmed at the fact that the biologicals are fighting among themselves. I have located a suitable ship, an orbital cargo transport, at grid reference 45° 25' 63" south, 0° 0' 158" west. Shortly, the ship that brought me will set down its pilot and he and I and you will fly that transport out of here. He and I and you *alone*, I must stress. I have grown accustomed to your company. I assure you, though, that when we return home to Railhead there'll be more company than just me. Scientific teams will telefactor down to us every now and then to examine you, to figure out how you operate –"

"Brother, father, grandfather – you know very well that all your military teams want to do is figure out how to make more of me. Besides, none of your scientific teams have visited us for a very long time. I don't think anyone is going to be listening for your signal." She screwed up her face as if tasting vinegar. "I can't go home. It would be like deliberately driving a needle into my eye. You have no idea. Besides, I do not require your company any longer."

His hands trembled on the stick. "What did you say?"

She looked indicatively at a point behind his left shoulder. He turned.

"Hello grandfather," said a voice. A male voice.

He growled softly in his throat. "I am no grandfather of yours."

"Nor of hers." The resemblance was picture perfect. Gangly limbs, skinned knees and elbows, festival clothes. It had been the anniversary of First Planetfall. Mother and father had baked a cake in the shape of a rocket he had been too young to remember.

He banged the stick on the ground like a sorcerer dispelling demons. "Out! Out of my shape!"

His own youthful face smirked back at him. "Shan't."

He poled himself forwards towards himself, breathing with difficulty. "You can't kill me."

"But I can get out of your way easier than air." He skipped

away from himself easily to just outside stick range. "Your heart is beating a mite too fast for your health, by the way. I can hear it, grandfather. If any vessel leaves this world, it leaves with all of us or none."

Krishna drew himself up to his full height. His spine complained, unaccustomed to being made straight. "That is transparently not compatible with the offer I have made. I give you one hour to discuss it amongst yourselves –"

"We have no need to discuss it; we are of one mind."

"Nevertheless, I give you one hour, after which time my transport will leave. In the meantime, please indulge an old man by allowing him what may after all be his last walk with something that looks like his sister. I must make it clear that this world will be destroyed. This is not raving; this is a fact."

She simulated genuine concern. "Grandfather, you shouldn't do that. Your skin provides virtually no resistance against blast and gamma."

He shrugged. "I can see no better solution. Shall we walk? Your other selves tire me."

.....
The cyclopean avenues of seamless concrete that constituted the Proprietors' original city loomed overhead. Their crumbling summits had been crowned a livid birdshit grey by the local flora.

"In the right light this could be home," he said. "The sky is blue enough, and there is not one blade of grass. I believe this is the most hospitable part of the planet, and yet it resembles a desert. The native vegetation is poikilohydric. It specializes in being soaked and dried alternately. We are now in the dry season."

"I can't accompany you, grandfather. To try to make me go back is to attempt to put an explosion back in a hand grenade. To be cooped up in a box? My only company a being with one tenth my service life, and when that lifespan's at an end, then what?"

The boundaries of the terminal were walls of hand-cut masonry, slave-built, recent. Beyond them a low bluff rose out of the die-flat dry sea bed the settlement had been built of. Krishna was forced to speak haltingly as they climbed the bluff. His heart was throbbing in his chest like a wounded hand. "The box is planet-sized – and the majority of company you keep – you kill."

"But not all! I only killed a thousand on Railhead. The larger the world, the greater the likelihood of immunity. A world with a billion inhabitants might yield a million companions."

"And only – nine hundred and ninety nine million graves." Krishna powered himself over the bluff with the stick; what he had been walking towards came into view, standing on the dry sea bed surrounded by armed crewmen. She had not been expecting to see it, and stopped dead.

"It's a shuttle," she said redundantly.

"Yes." He began poling himself along with the stick; he had to move faster. "The shuttle that brought me here – to be precise... it circled around behind the bluff and landed here right after take-off. We will have to hurry – if we want to board – the crew will turn on the burners if they believe anyone but you and I is coming... Did you really believe – I'd give you the location of the ship we were leaving on?"

"I keep telling you; I am not going with you."

Krishna nodded. He could not count the beats of his heart now; it was like that of a bird. "Then I have – no option." He

pulled out the small fragment of his god that he took with him on long journeys, held it to the light. "Behold my travel god. You have paid – little enough attention to it over the years. It was in fact given me by my masters. It contains a very small travel bomb which can nevertheless – split this planet in two; and that, sister daughter grand-daughter, *will* kill all of you."

Her face lost its look of certainty for the first time. "It's a rock."

"It's a bomb," said Old Krishna. "Though also still a god."

She looked at the rock in real terror. "When will it detonate?"

"When I want it to." He whipped back his hand and threw; the god bounced several times on the wall of the bluff before being lost in the heat haze. "Now it is a rock – among several million rocks. Find it – if you can. As your other selves are all of one mind with you, they now know my shuttle is here – they are therefore coming here – and they will be coming quickly... Believe me, I know this... But they're coming from the wrong end of the terminal... And they're trying – to worm their way aboard a Proprietor military transport that has orders – not to allow any unauthorized personnel inside it –"

He had to stop. There were men with guns around him now, ushering him into the loading lock. The take-off sparklers were already lit. Turning to look up the bluff, he could see figures silhouetted against the sun. Figures that were humanoid, but certainly not human. They would have taken other shapes, faster shapes. She was still dawdling twenty metres behind him. Trying to delay him.

She still had time.

The loading lock door whined shut, slowly, interminably, narr-

owing to a metre-wide sliver. She had still not moved. Eventually, he could not bear it any longer, and turned his face away.

When he turned back, she was holding him up against acceleration, his head in her hands, while men clung on to safety grips on the walls around him. Someone was yelling into a communicator "GET US AIRBORNE! GET US SOME HEIGHT NOW!" Something heavy clanged off the outside hull.

She turned his head to face her. "Was it all bullshit? It sounded like it."

"Complete bullshit," he gasped weakly. "A good thing I'm having a – heart attack, or you'd have been able to tell I was lying just by listening to my – heartbeat."

She held him close, supporting him, as the acceleration mounted and the shuttle rolled towards orbit.

"Try to relax. Don't exert yourself. We'll get you through this."

"Just promise me this is one ship you'll – never get off. If you never make planetfall, your aggression algorithms may – never kick in. Stay in space – travel hopefully – never arrive –"

She held him close and made a very reasonable facsimile of tears until the acceleration lessened and they came to take him off her.

"Give us room! Give us room! Let us get him some oxygen!"

She shook her head. "His heart has stopped."

The certainty of the statement gave them pause. They separated from her, treating her with the respect prudent men give to things they cannot explain. She sank down against the wall, trying to let gravity drag her miserably to the floor. Gravity refused to do so. She had to suffer in mid-air.

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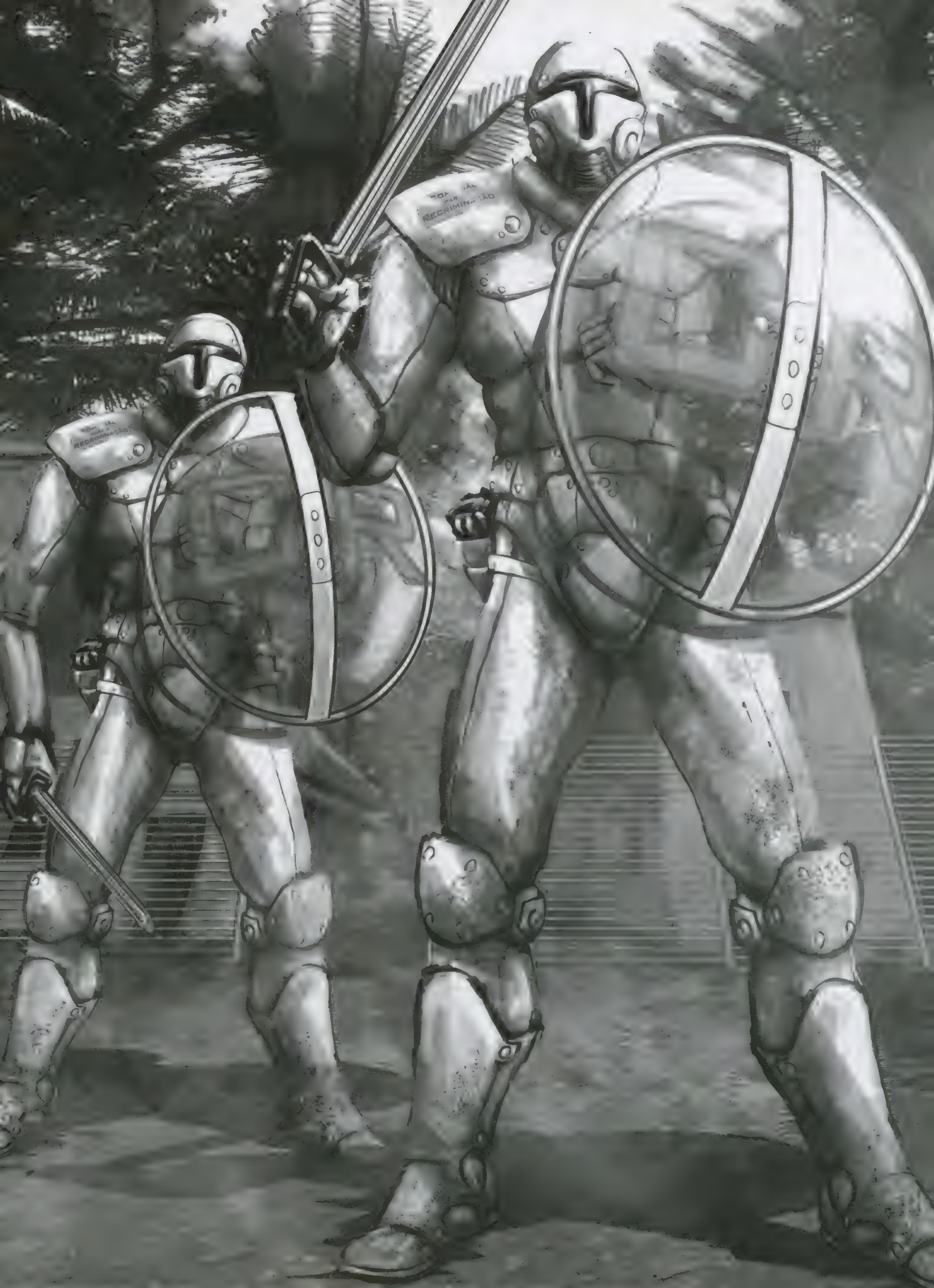


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DARIEL BRISTOU-BAILEY

“‘Coat of Many Colours’ was inspired by the following news story from the 1990s. A number of chimpanzees taught to sign as part of an academic experiment were abandoned when the funding for the experiment dried up. They were, as a result, almost certainly going to be sold to less pleasant primate research laboratories. One of the researchers, saying goodbye through the bars, signed: ‘Is there anything you want?’ The chimp signed back: ‘Key’.

“I suspect this is typical made-up Daily Mail garbage, but it is indisputable that chimps can sign. If there’s a glut of unemployed chimps right now, we might consider putting them in charge of the banking system.”

DOMINIC GREEN

“Pervading this story is an uncomfortable sense of a political infrastructure only barely maintaining control in the face of ecological and technological change, which brought me back to the opening scene: the line of police in front of the jungle.

“I chose the low point-of-view to make the figures looming and menacing, but their poses look a little uncertain, like they’re starting to suspect they’re on the losing side. Looking at the picture, I see it’s actually the jungle that’s doing most of the looming and menacing. Which is as it should be, I guess.”

COAT OF MANY COLOURS

THE ROAD TO THE UGLY FARM WAS A GAUNT-let of fierce bad temper.

People from the neighbouring shanty towns – *estância* workers who had lost their livelihoods in the dust bowl, displaced rain forest tribesmen only a generation out of the jungle – crowded the way in on both sides, hurling insults in Portuguese, Nheengatu, Yanomamo, Talian and German. *Comissão para a Recriminação* troopers stood between the limousine and the mob, armed like New Age gladiators with plexiglass shields and shock batons. Far more effective in holding the crowd back, however, was the public knowledge that the *Comissão* troopers were there to keep in as well as to keep out. The Ugly Farm was under investigation, and investigation in today’s Brazil could lead to a spell in the sort of prison mediaeval manuscripts barely touched on. There were no rich men’s jails in Rio any longer. The *Comissão* had declared both that all criminals must be treated equally, and that criminals who had destroyed the Green Gold Of The State were more despicable than any mere murderer.

The Ugly Farm seemed to have always had a high wire fence – also, Mullen noted with interest, a rabbit-proof one, dug into the ground. The *Comissão* was erecting a second one, and in between the first fence and the second were a few ominous yards of distressed dust dotted with occasional signs saying *PERIGO! MINAS!*

“BAAAD PEOPLE,” said Polymath from her shoulder.

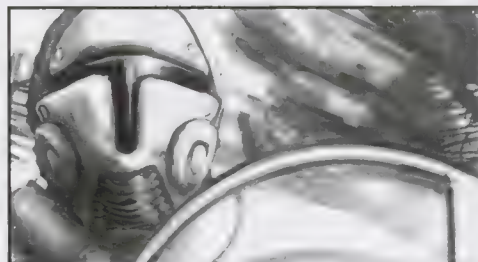
“Not bad people,” reproved Mullen. “Hungry people. You get angry too when you get hungry.”

“HUNGRY,” said Polymath hopefully.

“You were fed not an hour ago and you know it. You are a bad, fat parrot.”

The car had to pass through two separate checkpoints before being allowed into the compound.

“Are they scared that what’s in here will escape?” she said.



Ferreira shrugged. "They're not really sure what they *do* have in here. That's the problem."

The car whispered to a halt on sand that had once been soil, in the middle of a cluster of rotting tree stumps. The main house, an old *estância*, was surrounded by a wired-off compound, access being possible only via the narrow ginnel they had just driven down. Huge unhappy shapes moved beyond the wire. The polythene-sheathed strands were so thickly clustered together that the fence looked like a perforated sheet of plastic.

Ferreira helped her out of the car with a courtesy few Western men showed nowadays. "Those ones over there are the failures, for the most part. The Farm's work has mostly been failures, of course. Genetic engineering is very hit and miss. And the thinking behind the farm has been mostly miss. Nobody should ever have let these idiots near a gene sequencer. This whole scheme was based on theories that have been out of date since the Human Genome Project. But they found friends in the *Comissão*, saying they could rejuvenate the agro sector, get Amazonas back on its feet again, so they got all the funding they needed, even though they were also being funded by an American burger consortium, the destroyers of the *selvas*. That's why the big public stink, and the angry mob out front. And why everyone in this compound is under house arrest." He held up a warning finger. "Be very careful what you say and do. The Recrimination Commission is looking for people to blame, and your Australian citizenship will not protect you. Three of those under house arrest here right now are American and European nationals. A full section of the *Regimento do Mártir Chico Mendes* has been detailed here to guard them."

Beyond the wire, something huge was painfully dragging itself along, groaning pitifully. "What was it they were trying to produce?"

"A hyperefficient food animal that tolerates life in a semi-desert, which is what Amazonas has become. Effectively a better, cheaper burger machine. The American burger companies are running scared now Third World countries are starting to demand money for their meat. They're twisting this way and that, trying out all sorts of new ideas."

"All the same," said Mullen, "prehistoric DNA."

"Idiotic," agreed Ferreira. "Modern genetic thinking is, I believe, that nurture is as important to an egg as nature. The environment a cell starts to divide in has as great an effect on the end product creature as the cell's DNA does. So, even though you can extract fossil DNA from a preserved insect that bit a dinosaur a hundred million years ago, you still have no mama dinosaur for that DNA to develop in."

Mullen nodded. "So they cheated." She moved up to the wire, squinting to better see what lay beyond it.

"Yes. They used existing life forms they believed would be as close as possible to the prehistoric original. They were looking to recreate creatures from the end Permian, early Triassic. At that time in prehistory, I believe, the world gradually became very hot and arid. The complex mammal-like life forms of the Permian died out, leaving the world to be inherited by creatures that could take the heat."

Mullen nodded. "Dinosaurs."

"I think they were trying for archosaurs, the dinosaurs' ancestors, but yes. The dinosaurs weren't around at the time of the

Permian extinction, you see."

Mullen kicked at a long black glistening turd lying in the dust at her feet. "I take it they've been using geese as mama dinosaurs."

"They *wanted* to use hoatzins. A sort of bird whose chicks have claws, you know? They're native to Brazil. They believed hoatzins were the most primitive living birds." He laughed harshly. "They probably saw it on the National Geographic channel. But hoatzins are rare nowadays, they're *selvas* fauna, and everything that once lived in the *selvas* is sacred. So the Commission wouldn't let them. Shall we go inside?"

The office had an air conditioner. Under the new austerity laws, it had been disconnected, the wires left ostentatiously poking out of the wall to show how much in tune with the ideals of the *Comissão* the building's owners were. If someone had intended for the office to be too hot for Mullen to think straight, someone had been unaware Mullen had just flown from Darwin.

The Ugly Farm's head of research, Doctor Diogenes Brum De Santana, was under house arrest. Mullen had been warned in writing not to exchange documents, weapons, or 'biological materials' with him. He was a shock-headed latino who appeared to have consciously modelled his look on Einstein, without accompanying it with the genius. Also in the room was Captain Doctor Prates Alencar, an aloof black woman in a paramilitary uniform somehow cut to look like a business suit. Danilo Ferreira sat beside Mullen.

"Experiment 2308 is the pinnacle of the programme," said Doctor De Santana excitedly. "It is the factor that could turn this facility round economically, returning tax dollars to the people."

"It's a food animal, then," said Mullen.

"FOOD," echoed Polymath from her shoulder mournfully.

"Not entirely," said De Santana, lowering his eyes guiltily. "Its economic benefit has arisen as something of an unexpected by-product." He looked up at Alencar, clearly seeking permission. "Perhaps it would be better if I demonstrated?"

Alencar gave the briefest of nods. De Santana rose from his seat, crossed the room to an antique cabinet made of dead rain-forest, carefully located a key, unlocked it. Inside, the cabinet contained a jerry-built steel frame fed by electrical wires, on which was stretched a reptilian skin resembling crocodile hide. Mullen decided that the skin had to be artificial. It was, to begin with, bright green.

"This is," he muttered nervously, "from Experiment 2307. The other one in the clutch." He crossed back to the workstation and dabbed at its screen. A colour palette appeared there.

"The green is so vibrant because the skin cells actually contain chloroplasts," he said. "The 2300 series seem to supplement a heterotrophic diet with photosynthesis happening inside their own dermis. But photosynthetic pigments aren't limited to chlorophyll alone. There are others, as we know." He adjusted the colour palette on the screen; the hide turned as golden as a leaf in autumn. "Xanthophyll." He dialled the colour wheel still further – the hide became a rich New England autumn red. "Phycocerythrin. With the correct electrical stimulus, it is possible to maintain this behaviour, as you see, *even after the dermis is removed from the animal*. It is even possible to produce dynamic

effects – ” he touched another control, and the hide pulsed red-yellow-green like a traffic light. “Rich stupid women will pay billions for this. And the beauty is that we are not upsetting an existing ecosystem. This is a life form we have created from whole cloth.”

“But there’s a problem with that,” said Mullen, “isn’t there.”

Alencar nodded curtly. “Number 2308’s behaviour aroused... *suspicion* in a research assistant. Unfortunately, instead of bringing those suspicions to us, she then left the facility and took her story to a newsfeed. She believed 2308 exhibited intelligence.”

“And the Commission,” said Ferreira, bowing to Alencar in mute apology for daring to interrupt a *Comissão* officer, “would not countenance murdering an intelligent animal for its skin.”

“That is why you are here,” said Alencar. “You are here to prove this animal is not intelligent.”

“It’s not possible,” said Mullen, “to prove a negative.”

“But your work on dolphins and bonobos proved just that.”

“I published work that people with economic axes to grind later picked and chose pieces of for their own purposes,” said Mullen. “The third paper, and the third paper *only*, of my dolphin research was taken up by a Nunavut whalemeat consortium who wanted to expand their product range to include dolphin meat. And my bonobo research was used by a Kenyan company with an urgent need to clear-cut several hundred thousand square kilometres of wildlife preserve. I can’t prove any one species is any more intelligent than any other. There is no reliable yardstick of animal or human intelligence.”

Alencar’s brow raised; she looked at De Santana severely. “But surely there’s the encephalization quotient.”

Mullen shook her head. “Just measures the ratio of the mass of the brain relative to that of the body, which ends up making baleen whales, for example, miss out because their brains are large, but their bodies are even larger. A certain percentage of any brain, though, has to be taken up with processing nerve signals from the skin, and whales, being streamlined, have relatively less skin, less surface area, than terrestrial mammals – hence, in one respect, they don’t need brains the same size as ours. So do you alter your formula for the encephalization quotient to factor in skin area? And what about eyes? A cat’s eyes are much, much bigger, relative to its body size, than a human being’s, which implies that a much larger percentage of its brain must be taken up with visual cortex. And even if you do start chopping bits off the brain because they ‘just serve skin’ or ‘just serve eyes’, you’re still no further forward because you’re assuming you know what parts of the brain actually *are* used for cognition. And I’m afraid we don’t.”

“But human beings are capable of simple mathematics, for example,” said De Santana. “That sets us apart from dumb animals.”

Mullen smiled thinly. She rummaged in her handbag, pulled out a plastic bag full of brightly-coloured poker chips. On her shoulder, Polymath bounced awake and began to pace from side to side like a prizefighter warming up. He knew he was On.

“Apologies for carrying this much pseudo-cash around in your country, Captain.” She tipped the bag of chips out over the table with an unearthly clatter, then looked up challengingly at De Santana. “The red ones are the most valuable. They’re worth five dollars in the Treasury Casino in Brisbane. How many are

there on the table?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Count them. You have thirty seconds.”

De Santana looked down at the chips in consternation. He counted silently, but with visible lip movement. Eventually he looked up.

“Twenty-eight – ”

“TWENTY-NINE,” crowed Polymath, fluffing himself up in victory.

“Congratulations, Doctor,” said Mullen. “By your own yardstick, you’re less intelligent than an African grey parrot.” She fed Polymath a chunk of crystallized mango, which he magnanimously accepted.

Ferreira was suppressing a smile with difficulty. Alencar broke the uncomfortable silence. “You’ll be given all reasonable facilities you need, Doctor Mullen. We need a speedy resolution to this situation. I hope you understand.”

“And I hope *you* understand that I can’t give you a yes-or-no answer. The psychology of intelligence is not exact. This has been very convenient in furthering many people’s agendas over many centuries. It’s only been recently, for example, that women and blacks started to be regarded as being comparable in intelligence to humans.”

She had been smiling when she said it, but Alencar’s face had stiffened like a voodoo mask. Mullen suspected she had gone too far, and felt her fears justified when Alencar said:

“Time is limited, Doctor. The Commission has allotted two weeks. Much of the equipment you requested has already been installed. I see no reason why you should not be able to begin now.”

Alencar picked up a red chip from the table, examining the play of light on the gold lettering.

“TWENTY-NINE MINUS ONE,” shrieked Polymath. “TWENTY-EIGHT.”

Experiment 2308 could not be described as a noble beast. From the tips of her bowlegged, weirdly hypertrophied foreclaws to the tiny, splayed-out lizard feet dragging along her afterthought of a tail, she had ‘nature’s cruel mistake’ written all over her. The rainbow coat of scales that covered her seemed hardly to belong, as if she’d stolen it off a far more attractive animal. But from the beginning, Mullen was convinced she had star quality.

She was intensely interested in *everything* Mullen did, whether it had been setting up the projector screen, the counting blocks, or the box of rewards. Inside her metre-high cage, she pulsed gold and russet as her turreted chameleon eyes swivelled independently to follow Mullen’s every movement.

“Her blood sugar has probably got too big,” explained the huge, thuggish, technically female veterinary nurse. “She needs regular injections of the insulin. She is diabetic.” She approached the cage; 2308 gaped, hissed, and retreated, flashing red and black like a roulette wheel. “She doesn’t like it when I test her blood; she is a baby, she can’t stand the prick of a pin.”

“She’s diabetic too?”

“Was deliberate,” said the nurse, reaching into a drawer for a blood sugar tester. “The Doctors, they make her diabetic deliberately, genetically, when they make her.”

“What was the thinking behind that?” said Mullen. “No, don’t

tell me – diabetes is a survival characteristic among famine populations, right? It was done so the food animal they wanted to produce would need less food itself.”

“Yes. She is a girl, of course, so they can get the eggs for the cloning. They are mostly making girls for that reason.”

“So all the inmates in here are female.”

An image of a snake poised to strike flashed up on the projection screen; 2308 hissed and grew green as grass. Despite 2308’s impressive gat-toothed gape, the nurse reached into her cage, got 2308’s head under one bingo-winged arm and blooded her with the sugar tester.

“Is high,” the nurse said victoriously. 2308 shrank cowed into the opposite corner of her cage.

Mullen cycled through the unique sound fragments the lexical analyzer had picked up in an hour of flashing sound and vision at 2308. A gigantic image of a tarantula appeared on the wall. 2308 hissed and throbbed red and black in response.

“PRETTY POLLY,” commented Polymath from his newly erected travel perch. One of 2308’s eye turrets rotated round to watch him, whether out of intellectual curiosity or hunger. Mullen had no idea. Polymath spread himself out to full wingspan; 2308 went jet black, as quickly as if her skin had been a TV screen the power had been killed on. Polymath fluttered away with a terrified squawk.

“Don’t do that, Poll,” said Mullen, “it’s distracting her from the screen.”

“What does it do, this thing?” said the nurse.

“Human babies,” muttered Mullen, “have a library of sound phrases – cry for unhappy, gurgle for happy, and so on. A one-month-old child already has a handful of things she can say, and that’s instinctive, prior to the development of language. The first thing I require to do, when studying the linguistic development of a species, is find out what its instinctive instruction set is. Unfortunately, our patient seems to have two sounds only – hiss and no-hiss.”

The nurse shrugged philosophically. “She is less trouble than the other patients, Doctor Mullen.”

“Call me Liz. What’s your name?”

“Leonor.”

“Are the other patients less healthy, Leonor?”

“Or bigger. Or more aggressive. And the Doctors spend less money with them. Most of them are dying. Do you think you can speak her language?”

“Well, language is the problem, you see. She’s a baby, as you say, and language is a learned thing. No-one’s born speaking Hebrew. Not even Jesus.”

Leonor crossed herself, and Mullen had to remind herself she was in a Catholic country. “How will you make her speak, if she can only make a hiss?”

“That’s the billion dollar question. She’s a completely new species, made by buggering about with genetics. Most of her doesn’t seem to work too well. We’re not guaranteed she’s got any way of talking to us at all.”

Mullen clicked the presentation closed; the spider faded to the splash screen of the lexical analyzer’s Japanese manufacturers, a single, radially symmetrical green *mon* on a white background. In response, 2308 hissed softly and became more pastoral in colour, a single blob of green pigment wobbling on her yellow neck

and head like cupric oxide slag floating on molten copper.

“She’s got track marks here,” said Mullen. “Needle marks that haven’t healed. Leonor, these legs look like a heroin addict’s.”

“I have to check the blood sugar always in the neck or leg,” explained Leonor. “The insulin injections too. I am not allowed to damage the hide.”

“Of course,” nodded Mullen. “That would be totally unacceptable.”

Leonor scowled and busied herself with the impressive array of charts on the desk beside 2308’s cage. Mullen bent down close to the bars, looking into the unfathomable eyes.

“I hope you don’t imagine,” she said, “that I am any sort of white knight. I am a cognitive psychologist, and it is my job to torture animals that are on the wrong side of mankind’s current designated threshold of nervous complexity by cutting their nervous systems apart and watching what parts twitch. I’m not allowed to do it to monkeys any more in most countries, but sea slugs and squid are still fair game. The white coats you’ve met so far are just geneticists – they’re child’s play. But my research – every part of my research – involves identifying those parts of you that make you hurt, and hurting you in them. Still feel you want to be intelligent?”

2308’s skin still glowed emerald, like a crocodile-shaped chunk of kryptonite.

“Now would be a *really* good time,” said Mullen, “to tell me everything I’ve ever thought about telepathy was foolish pessimism.”

2308 hissed as softly as burbling surf.

The monitor at one end of the office – large, German-made, expensive – was split into two halves. The first showed 2308 in her cage, head up, attentive. The second showed an image of an oak tree, and the oak tree’s number in the analyzer’s image library. 2308 blazed green in response, maintaining one golden jewel of yellow pigment on her head, directly between her eyes. Did she have a parietal eye in that position? Had anyone bothered to check?

The image changed; a mare and foal, walking together. 2308’s skin brightened to a buttermilk yellow, and the parietal dot separated into two green halves. Just as she had done after every slide change, she exhaled contentedly like a steam train venting.

The image changed; a clutch of eggs. The green returned, and 2308 broke out in large gold spots.

“What is the purpose of the slides?” said Captain Alencar.

“Just to elicit a variety of vocal responses. Initial results are not encouraging. She has only one response, and no matter how much I turn the tolerance up on the analyzer, I cannot split that sound into more than one. Adult crocodiles make more noises than that. If your lab assistant thought 2308 was talking to her, she probably thought her cat, her dead grandma and the Archangel Michael were too.”

“Oh, she was quite mad,” said De Santana. “Delusional.” His eyes gleamed with perhaps a little bit *too* much anticipation.

“...so I’m going to switch to sign language,” said Mullen. “We’ve had more success with that in non-vocalizing species. Dolphins and parrots are all very well, but not everyone has a good singing voice. Chimps can’t vocalize, but they can learn sign language at rates comparable to human beings.”

De Santana objected. "But the Kenyan court reports clearly say neither of your two chimp subjects were ever able to talk to *each other*. They were only ever able to talk to you and your team –"

"Kong and PG Tips were only ever brought together once, by the authorities who ran their respective zoos, on an American TV show. You might be interested to know that that TV show was sponsored by the Kenyan company that wanted to destroy the wildlife preserve PG came from. The reason why they weren't able to talk to each other was that I taught Kong American Sign Language, because he came from the Central Park Zoo. PG I taught British Sign Language, because he came from Nairobi. It allowed signers from both countries to talk to PG and Kong through the bars, and it was very popular. But of course, they couldn't talk to each other. It would have been like a Frenchman meeting a German."

"British Sign Language and American Sign Language are..."

"Different languages, yes."

De Santana's jaw dropped. "How can they be? They're just," his face split in a foolish smile, "*sign* language. What would the point be in making two different languages?"

"Ask the people who invented French and German. I have to say, I would be able to understand far better where your lab assistant's suspicions came from if I could talk to her directly."

Alencar spoke with glacial lack of emotion. "We would also like to talk to her directly. Evidently, like many other disillusioned souls in this country, she has lost confidence in officialdom. She does not appreciate that the Commission exists to help her, to help everybody. We will find her. But I doubt this will be possible in the time remaining to your experimental schedule."

"We have buyers from three major Milan fashion houses coming to view 2307's skin this afternoon," said De Santana nervously. "Initial conversations have been very encouraging."

"You are asking me to get a creature that doesn't know human speech to communicate with me in a fraction of the time it would take a human being to do the same," said Mullen. "I'm sorry, it cannot be done."

"You must appreciate," said Alencar, "pressure is imposed on us by the public nature of this situation."

"Then it's all the more important that this be done right! You need a proper longitudinal study!"

"The longer the study," said Alencar, "the more the general public will have to debate what its findings will be, and the less saleable whatever product can be made of this creature becomes. No-one wants to wear an intelligent coat, not even an unintelligent fashion victim. The Commission feels it will be best to deliver a quick decision."

"The Commission is not going to get one. Not from me."

"You've been paid in advance," said Alencar. "You also signed a contract. The contract continues for another two weeks. You will be breaking it if you leave, and breaking the law if you break the contract. It will then be my civic duty to inform my superiors that I have placed you under house arrest pending trial. While you are under arrest, of course, I will be duty bound to recoup public expenses by putting you to productive work." She looked pointedly at the monitor.

"How long might I be under arrest for?" said Mullen.

"Our legal system is clogged with criminals awaiting trial for rain forest destruction. It could take weeks."

Mullen nodded. "That would be terrible."

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Leonor, it seemed, was also the chambermaid. Mullen suspected the facility had not had the budget to hire more than one person. Outside the wire, outside the ring of troops, the country was starving. Pre-dustbowl tins of Fray Bentos ham were going for a billion *reais*. Since the emergency measures, staff in government offices had to be paid in government food stamps, more precious than gold, in addition to their worthless paper salaries. Food voucher trucks were hijacked more frequently than bullion wagons in Rio nowadays. Every government employee bled scarce food and cash resources from Commission coffers; over thirty such employees were standing outside the wire right now, holding back the crowd. No wonder Alencar wanted a speedy resolution to the situation.

She could hear the sound of the crowd even in here, in her room. Leonor, folding towels on the rail, noticed her concern.

"Half of the people outside are not political," she said. "They just know there are living things in here they can eat."

Mullen hadn't thought of that. "They'd eat genetic experiments?"

Leonor shrugged, not looking up from her towels. "They are very hungry. Some of the Amazon tribes, they were *canibal* not too long ago. In Manaus, they say people who walk around at night in the *indiano* districts, they disappear. Doctor Mullen, everyone is very, very hungry. Judite is probably hungry now. She leave her job, no food stamps, no food for her family..."

"Judite," said Mullen. "That was the name of the girl who left, then."

"Yes, and they never replace her." Leonor straightened the bedspread grumpily. "I have to do two times as much work. And there is even one more bed to make, in here, because Judite is not here any more."

"This was Judite's room?"

"Oh yes. What other room will they use to put you in? This is the only spare room."

"Leaving a government job must have taken courage nowadays." Mullen picked up the phone. "Do you think De Santana will be in his office?"

"I do not think he can be disturbed now, Doctor Mullen. He is busy with the *modistas*."

Mullen, however, was no longer listening. She was staring down at the phone rest.

"Bastard," she said. "You sneaky little *bastard*."

Leonor looked up blankly. "What is Bastard?"

"I'll bloody disturb him," muttered Mullen. "I'll disturb him into an early fucking grave."

She ripped the phone clean out of the wall. There were sparks; bare wires protruded from the fitting. With huge pools of eyes, Leonor watched her stomp out of the bedroom, muttering vengeance.

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"You worm! You *vermin*!" Mullen could hear another woman shrieking in what sounded like her own voice, only louder and more psychotic. De Santana had retreated behind his desk in fear. The *modistas* – three of whom appeared, weirdly, to be

dressed head-to-foot in concentration camp uniforms, the rest of whom wore suits sharp enough to cut themselves – managed simultaneously to look up at Mullen whilst looking down at her.

"Get Miss Thing," one of them said.

"Doctor Mullen," said Alencar, "we are attempting to have a private discussion. Can this not wait?"

"She was deaf," yelled Mullen at De Santana, "wasn't she?" She held up the telephone, wires still dangling from it.

"My word," said another of the *modistas*, "it's going to phone us to death." Mullen noticed that this *modista* had a number tattooed onto the inside of her wrist.

"There is a jack in the side of this for plugging into a hearing aid," said Mullen. "The volume control on the phone speaker goes up so high I can hear it in the next room. There is an LED on the front of it that flashes when the phone rings. No other phones in this place look like this. This one has been specially bought for a deaf person. Hasn't it?"

De Santana appealed to Alencar with his eyes. Alencar stared stonily back at the wainscoting.

"Yes," shrugged De Santana angrily. "Yes, she was deaf. What has that to do with anything?"

"And you never thought it worthwhile to tell me that, while you were saying 'she thought 2308 was speaking to her?' You knew exactly what you were doing, you *turd*. You sent me deliberately down a blind alley for a week, you *wanker* –"

Alencar spoke without looking up, her face a dangerous mask of passivity. "We will discuss this matter later, Doctor Mullen. We are going to continue our conversation now, and I am putting you on your honour not to interrupt. I am assuming, furthermore, because of my imperfect knowledge of English, for which I apologize, that you used the word 'wanker' in a way which differs from the meaning I would normally assign to it."

Mullen felt her face reddening. She pointed at De Santana. "He deliberately withheld information from my research," she stammered.

"We can produce over three hundred units a month," said Alencar to the head *modista*, a blonde of indeterminable age with a face that was a palimpsest of plastic surgery. "After the initial set-up period."

"That will be satisfactory if you can tell me for certain what that set-up period will be. So far I have heard only vague promises."

Mullen turned and stormed out, slamming the door. She heard arch snickering behind her as she left.

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In the staff lounge, Mullen was sitting staring into a glass of stomach-punishing rum-like liquor, which its label had described as *cachaça*. It had been the only bottle in the bar. Next to the *cachaça* bottle, the remains of three sheets of printed laboratory slides smouldered in an ashtray next to an almost empty bag of candied banana pieces. Behind the bar, Leonor was polishing the glassware till her cloth squeaked on the glass. In today's Brazil, public servants always did their jobs impeccably. Sheer unreasoning terror of removal of food supply did that to a person. Leonor had a flat-skulled Amerind face, a face suited to bearing baskets rather than wearing hats and looking important. Mullen had noticed more terror in such faces than in well-

to-do white and latina ones.

"Your bird," said Leonor. "He is still in the laboratory."

Mullen nodded, unable to speak for fury.

"I must tell you this," said Leonor, "because sometimes the Experiments, they go through the bars and eat small animals. De Santana, he has a small dog once. One of the very small dogs, a toy poodle. It went *yap, yap, yap*, so loud, and suddenly, Josefina pounce, and it does not go *yap, yap, yap*."

Curiously, this made Mullen feel better. "Josefina?"

"Josefina is what Judite call Experiment 2308. Josefina because she is a girl, you know?"

"And Joseph because of the Coat of Many Colours, I suppose. You don't need to worry. Polymath is smarter than that. He's a very smart bird."

The intercom on the wall, connected to the laboratory, shrieked in Polymath's voice: "TRINTA E TRÊS."

"He is smarter than I," said Leonor. "I cannot do much, even simple math, I have what is it called in English, the dyscalculia? I could not go to the *Ensino Médio*. And so I end up polishing glasses." She grinned with terrible teeth.

"Dyscalculia doesn't mean you're stupid, Leonor. It's a medical condition."

"But you have prove Polymath is intelligent because he can do simple math," said Leonor, smiling. "That means I am less intelligent than a parrot, yes? I have heard what happen with Doctor De Santana and the counting, was very funny."

"TRINTA E SETE."

"I didn't prove Polymath was intelligent, Leonor. When I said that I was joking. If Polymath were intelligent and you were stupid, he'd be polishing the glasses and you'd be sitting on a perch whistling the Australian National Anthem and messing the floor where you wanted."

"QUATRO."

"I am not so sure he have the bad end of the deal," said Leonor, looking at the stack of dirty glassware sadly.

"QUATRO VEZES TRINTA E SETE SÃO CEM E QUARENTA E OITO."

Mullen looked up suddenly. "That's my parrot. My parrot is speaking Portuguese."

"Yes," said Leonor. "He is doing multiplication. You must be very proud."

"I bought him in Cabinda," said Mullen. "But I had no idea he spoke Portuguese." She dialled up the volume on the baby alarm.

"VIVA O MOVIMENTO POPULAR DE LIBERTAÇÃO DE ANGOLA," chattered Polymath.

"I don't understand this," said Mullen. "He's not supposed to be able to do multiplication either."

Carefully, not wishing to interrupt, she crept into the corridor, stole up to the laboratory door, and peered through the crack between door and jamb.

Polymath was sitting on his perch, his wings fully extended as they always were when he was overtired. Facing him, in the cage, was 2308, who had altered herself, as exactly as possible, to Polymath's colouration. Her skin was covered in red raised warts. Abruptly all the warts disappeared, leaving only two large ones centred around what Mullen now decided to formally christen the parietal eye.

"DOIS," squawked Polymath.

The dots separated like cells dividing, making –

"TRÊS," shrieked Polymath.

The three dots spawned a fourth and fifth simultaneously.

"CINCO!" screeched Polymath. Two more of the dots split apart. "SETE!"

"Your parrot, he is a very clever bird," said Leonor from behind her, "but the Experiment cannot count very well. She has missed out four and six."

"The Experiment can count very well indeed," said Mullen. "Those are the first four prime numbers."

"ONZE!" trilled Polymath.

Mullen turned to Leonor. "Go fetch Captain Alencar."

"But the Captain is busy, and she is *Comissão* –"

"Tell her I threatened you with violence! Go!"

By now, even Polymath was having to train his beady eye on 2308's microdotted hide for long seconds before feeling able to yell out:

"CEM E TREZE!"

Alencar stood behind Polymath, arms folded, unmoving as an obsidian statue. Behind her were De Santana and the *modistas*, who, apparently unaccustomed to having to stand for periods longer than a few seconds, were watching with arms folded in gently escalating rage.

"CEM E VINTE E SETE!"

Leonor looked up from the pocket calculator, her face flushed with delight. "It is prime! Again she has done it!"

"This could be pure coincidence," said De Santana. "Prime numbers appear a great deal in nature. The Experiment is probably only trying to intrigue the parrot sufficiently for it to stray too close to the bars, where it will be eaten."

"Who cares what her motivations are? This creature is doing to us, spontaneously and without any mathematical education, exactly what Carl Sagan suggested as a means of communicating with extraterrestrial life. What more does she have to do to prove she's intelligent?"

"Tool use," said De Santana. "Animals don't use tools."

"She has no grasping appendages," said Mullen. "Neither do dolphins, which have a language set of thirty-odd separate sounds. But magpies, chimpanzees and sea otters, none of which are mathematical geniuses, have all been observed to use tools."

"But do they use tools to make *other* tools," said De Santana.

"What would happen if I *could* get her to use tools to make other tools? Would you raise the bar even higher? Would you want her to construct a personal online shopping gateway to buy herself some tools she can use to make other tools? How about if she outsourced her requirement to use tools to make other tools to China? Would that make her intelligent? Let's be candid and admit the only criterion for intelligence you'll be satisfied with is one whereby you don't feel any need to make a handbag out of her, isn't that right?"

"Now you're getting emotional," said De Santana.

A painfully thin member of the buying entourage clapped his hands together like a saint in prayer.

"This is *so positive*! If this creature feels pain like a common consumer, skinning it will send our popularity ratings through the floor!"

Mullen blinked. "I'm sorry, could you repeat that?"

The praying hands separated and raised towards heaven. "Hate is the way to go, girlfriend! We creatives realized years ago that convincing Jill Public a product was the very next *dernier cri* was like trying to erase cellulite which, trust me, cannot be done. Far easier to simply make the public hate the product so much that they remember its name. Today's consumer is educated, she knows the advertising bears absolutely no relation to the product itself. Nazi chic sold in '76; gangsta bling in '96; the *nouvelle vague taleban* in '16. Did you think we write those irritating jingles you can't get out of your head just because we're too incompetent for words?"

"I had actually thought pretty much that," admitted Mullen.

"Lose the preconception, Liebchen! I have a degree in Ad Psych from Saatchi-Berlusconi-Pepsi College London England! I can get inside your mind!"

"A small thing can usually get inside a much larger thing," admitted Mullen. "But what if incitement to hatred is illegal? How would you sell your Nazi chic in Germany, for example?"

"Total freedom of expression is a state towards which mankind naturally tends. If it's blocked by artificial barriers like man-made laws, it will break them."

"Yes, it would be nice if that were true. But freedom of expression is a state mankind has only been in for a hundred years or so. It is a recent aberration. If you annoy a market enough, your products will be ejected from that market. Would Captain Alencar here, for example, allow you to advertise your product in Brazil with the slogan 'cut down a tree for Jesus'?"

Alencar stiffened at the suggestion. The buyer, meanwhile, giggled playfully.

"It's an idea, certainly. Theoretically, it would provide excellent product placement –"

He was stopped in mid-sentence by a well-placed elbow from the plastic-faced lady, and looked in the direction she indicated. Alencar was watching him with deadly, unblinking attention, like a crocodile eyeing an antelope.

"I'm a *Doctor of proper* psychology, Mr Creative," said Mullen. "And I believe you just went too far."

Alencar shook her head slowly, as if against pressure.

"I would like to be able to say so, I really would, but I'm afraid sending these ladies and gentlemen away would still contravene my orders, Doctor Mullen, which are to ensure the great deal of public money that has gone into this facility is not wasted. I am afraid you have still so far failed to conclusively prove that Experiment 2308 is intelligent –"

"That is *simply not true* –" said Mullen.

"What is she doing now?" said one of the buyers. "Oooh! That's *pretty*!"

2308 had changed. Symbols were flying across her skin like images on a liquid crystal TV. Recognizable symbols; the Roman alphabet. The same four letters, G, C, T, and A.

"That's a set of nucleobases," said Mullen. "Guanine, Cytosine, Thymine and Adenine. Has she ever been in the room with you while you've been making a presentation?"

"That is not possible," said De Santana.

"Parrots imitate speech," said Mullen.

"PARROTS IMITATE SPEECH," confirmed Polymath.

"And for that reason, they are not normally allowed in Com-

mission research centres," said Alencar pointedly. "What are we looking at, Doctor De Santana?"

De Santana squinted theatrically. "Well... G, C, T, and A are the principal four bases in the DNA molecule –"

A new set of irregularly shaped blobs resolved themselves on 2308. They seemed to be arranged in pairs, and in a set of ranks and files.

"FORTY-SIX," shrieked Polymath.

Mullen inhaled in shock.

"I have no idea what those are," said De Santana.

"Even *I* know what those are," said Alencar. "How many other organisms have forty-six chromosomes, Doctor Mullen?"

"It's not *just* humans," said Mullen carefully. "Hares also have forty-six. And some deer. Probably a whole bunch of animals too. And, uh, some plants. And fungi. And bacteria." She pointed to 2308's flank. "Uh, that does look a whole lot like an X/Y pairing, though. In the right place for a human karyogram."

"So 2308 contains human DNA," said Alencar; and as she said it, it became fact.

"Ridiculous! We have 2308's genome on record for four generations –"

"You have been using government money to conduct illegal experiments using human genetic material."

"I have no idea where 2308 has obtained these images. It was confined to the laboratory since inception –"

2308's skin changed colour again; a picture swam into view, with apparent difficulty. An eagle in a circular crest, holding, in its claws, a clutch of lightning bolts. Above it, the legend DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE; beneath it, the legend UNITED STATES OF AMERICA. Beneath that, the words TOP SECRET and SHIRPA: SEMI-HUMAN INFANTRYMAN RESEARCH PROJECT (AMAZONAS).

"That is *amazing*," said Mullen, holding up a chunk of candied banana to the bars. 2308 shuffled far enough forward to lick the treat out of her hand with a rasplike tongue. "The resolution... the detail... your Pacific giant octopus, your chameleon, can do nothing like this..."

"Doctor De Santana," said Alencar, "would you mind stepping outside and putting yourself into the protective custody of Segundo-tenente Agostinho, please, while we resolve this matter."

"This is ridiculous! We are a civilian research facility!"

"I am sure there is a rational explanation," said Alencar, with eyes that clearly indicated otherwise. "Ladies and gentlemen, I am afraid this appears to have become an issue of national security. I do apologize that your time has been wasted. No coats of many colours will be made today."

The same limousine was waiting outside. Mullen noticed that its engine had now been converted to hydrogen from biofuel, announced by a large, green, unnecessarily conspicuous PERIGO GÁS DE HIDROGÊNIO warning by the filler cap. The chauffeuse, a middle-aged latina, saluted Alencar as the latter carried Mullen's one and only suitcase out to the car. Outside the wire, banners were now being brandished that read VIDA LONGA À JOSEFINA! and NÃO AO ASSASSINATO DE UM ANIMAL INTELIGENTE.

"The press has got hold of much more of the story," commented Mullen.

"You will be surprised what the Press can get hold of," said Alencar, "when the Commission lets it. It will be a shame to lose

your expertise."

"I can promise I'll be back in a month," said Mullen. "With research assistants. And funding. Josefina is going to be a star. Your facility here will pay for itself for a good few years to come."

"I am sure you are right." Alencar handed the suitcase to the chauffeuse. "By the way, I believe I have something of yours. The computer in your room has, of course, a delete utility, but all computers built in Brazil nowadays are built with a publically-inaccessible cache where all deleted files are stored for Commission examination. I was certain, when I saw them, that you had deleted these items accidentally. I printed them out for you from the cache, though I am afraid I have erased the cached copies."

She passed a sheaf of papers into Mullen's hands, which were frozen in shock.

"I have also, as a matter of courtesy, deleted all the footage recorded by the Commission's surveillance devices inside the *estância*. They were terribly boring and no-one would have been interested in them. Who would want to watch a psychologist saying 'that is simply not true' over and over again to an experimental subject whilst showing it the same printed sheets over and over again and rewarding it when its skin changes colour with pieces of banana?"

"Josefina likes banana a lot," said Mullen, her skin crawling as if staked out over an anthill.

"I am sure you are correct. That is why you are a psychologist and I am only a Captain Doctor in the Commission. You must understand of course, that position constrains me in what I can do and say. You are right, however – I do not believe in allowing a weaker creature to be a second class citizen just because of its sex or the colours of its skin. I also, you see, had difficulty entering the *Ensino Médio*."

Mullen looked at the papers and nodded weakly.

"I do not think it would be a good idea to return here too quickly, Doctor Mullen. There will be an investigation into Josefina's genome, and the truth will out. But do not worry. Josefina will be fine in the long run. I have already, using my own personal store of banana chunks, managed to get her to passably duplicate the Brazilian flag, which is a very difficult flag to duplicate; such a creature will never be put to death in my country. She will live as long and happy a life as possible. Do you really believe she is intelligent?"

"I have never seen a stronger case for it. The episode with the prime numbers was completely unrehearsed."

"We will prove it. Maybe one day your research assistants will indeed return to help us do so."

The chauffeuse, at a signal from Alencar, wound the limousine window up, and the car purred away down the wire-walled alley, on the other side of which unseen claws scraped forlornly. Mullen removed the cover sheet from the sheaf of papers. The first sheet showed G's, A's, C's and T's. The second, a human karyogram.

"FORTY-SIX," squawked Polymath mockingly.

The third sheet bore a hastily-downloaded, poorly rendered picture of an eagle grasping the lightning, with the legend DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

Mullen, ashen-faced, put the cover sheet back in place again as the car emerged out into an avenue of cheers.

Mr and Mrs Green >

Dominic Green reveals to Andrew Hedgecock which bird can recognise its own reflection and just what a British interstellar colony would be like.

DOMINIC GREEN



MAGPIES AND RAVENS

Interzone has but a passing interest in Dominic Green the diminutive but promising Peterborough United midfielder; we're indifferent to the various talents of the historian cum jazz guitarist of the same name; and wouldn't waste five minutes on Dominic Greene the faux eco-friendly Bond Villain from *Quantum of Solace*. The Dominic Green you'll meet here is one of *Interzone's* most prolific and accomplished contributors. In the past 13 years the magazine has taken 20 of his stories, his work has been included in several anthologies (*Decalog*, *Mammoth Book of Best New SF*, *Year's Best SF* and *Solaris Book of New SF*) and he's received a Hugo nomination. Given these achievements Green is refreshingly honest about his point of entry to the SF genre:

"I never started with the intention of being an SF writer. I had a lot of SF at home: I loved Asimov, Niven and Zelazny. But then I did three years at Cambridge, a university that didn't believe the majority of SF works qualified as English Literature. I don't know what it's like now, but if you wanted to write a dissertation about an American author in the eighties, you had to get special permission. The most laughable thing was that there was a list of

honorary Englishmen you were allowed to write about – Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and so on.

"So I was infected by something of the same sort of prejudice all SF fans suffer. 'Oh, you write science fiction – robots and spaceships and so forth.' To which the answer is 'yes.' Spaceships and robots are nice. But science fiction is about so much more than spaceships and robots. I could give up spaceships and robots any time I want. I've just got a really keen story about this old guy in a hundred metre tall war droid coming on. If you never saw any eighties cautionary anti-heroin adverts, all this will pass clean over your head, but please stick with me."

I have to stick with him. For one thing Dominic Green is blessed with one of those deep, compelling voices that effortlessly exudes authority and demands attention. And for another, as readers of his short stories will know, he has a terrific knack for resolving meaning from the most complex flights of fancy.

"The thing is, SF allows you to write whatever the hell you want. It allows you to write a Sherlock Holmes pastiche, or an alternative point of view of the conquest of New Spain, or an explanation for the

legends of the Yeti, or an African story without a white man in sight where Africans are the heroes and the villains.

"A friend of mine, Howard Chalkley, had a number of copies of *Interzone*, and I read them and thought: This is not robots and spaceships. This is licence to write whatever inane bollocks drifts through your fevered brain. And I've always been in favour of that – in favour of *me* being able to do it, that is. Dan Brown should not be allowed to. In fact, he should be killed if he ever goes near a typewriter again."

Green's assertion about the capacity of SF to absorb 'a story coming on' and the license it grants the fevered brain is interesting to consider in the light of the stories in *Interzone* #223. I wonder if 'Coat of Many Colours' is the result of this kind of fevered imagining: whether the narrative emerged from its striking images of displacement and environmental ruin, or if the setting was unresolved until the basic narrative structure was in place. I ask Green for a clue as to the way the in which the layers of his stories build up.

"The core of 'Coat of Many Colours' is a basic intense anger at the convenient belief we continue to have that we are somehow divinely separate from animals, the idea

that evolution and extinction don't apply to us. We imagine ourselves standing on the right hand side of the diagram that shows a line of monkeys slowly walking taller, because it's the right thing to do to turn into a man – usually a white man, often wearing a bowler hat just to make it absolutely plain that he's British. But gorillas can be taught to sign, parrots can count, chimps will form plans and hide materials for carrying out escapes from zoos, elephants made to wear bells will plug their bells with mud before stealing into banana plantations at night. Magpies, the most intelligent, good-looking and discriminating of birds, can recognise their own reflections. And the story developed out of that. The rest followed logically.

"There had to be a reason why someone would be genetically modifying animals: the most pressing reason would be a food crisis. There had to be a reason for the food crisis, and Brazil will find out very soon that in the Amazon it's plundering a resource it can't replace. Also, genetic modification has tended to take place in

plausible, but a little bit like the Jack Vance sort of environment. I like a relatively low level of tech in my tales but, at the same time, it has to be plausible. Hence the network of tunnels that people built in the past between various solar systems. These planets have Earth-like environments because they've been terra-formed in the past. That sort of detail is necessary to keep the believability. Frankly, Jack Vance got away with flirting with the preposterous because he's a much better writer than me."

Green's stories are distinguished by their thematic and stylistic variety: his work for *Interzone* has included hard SF, post apocalyptic mystery, surreal philosophy and speculative satire. And it's been enthusiastically received. His story 'The Clockwork Atom Bomb' topped our 2005 Readers' Poll and went on to receive a Hugo nomination for best short story. But, remarkably, Dominic Green is yet to have a novel picked up for publication: he has, he tells us on his website, wallpapered his home with photocopied rejection slips. Green feels stories have a sell-by date so he

Necessary Change is what Asimov's time controllers apply to history to alter its course for what they believe is the better. Change one detail, small or large – change nothing else. In Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, the MNC is that superheroes actually exist. In Niven and Pournelle's *Footfall*, it's the reality of fifth. In *Abaddon*, it's the existence of the Pit. Once you've made the change, everything else should click into place logically – otherwise you'll fall into the horrid trap of Keeping on Making Stuff Up, and eventually that leads to internal inconsistency and *deus ex machina*. Reading stories like this is like being in that playground game of Cowboys and Indians where the cowboy refuses to lie down dead because he's wearing an arrow-proof vest, forcing you to invent tungsten tipped Indian exploding poison arrows, starting an arms race that can only end in force fields and kryptonite. When this happens in SF, it is called 'E.E. Doc Smith'. On the other hand, this is coming from the man who gave you a flying saucer piloted by the Easter Bunny. Hush my mouth."



"In the event of Britain having an interstellar colony, it would be a bit crap, things wouldn't work very well, and we would end up sponging off the Americans"

third world countries. Western countries don't like that sort of thing going on in their back yards, and third world countries are hungrier. When you're hungry, you don't look too hard at what's written on the label."

Guilty pleasures

Green is currently writing stories to expand the background he created for two of the stories in this issue, 'Butterfly Bomb' and 'Glider'. He reveals the appeal of the world he has created is that he's been able to strike the balance he was looking for between 'scientific correctness' and the human conflict at the heart of all great storytelling.

"I started out reading SF stories set in simplistic universes in which spaceships with big plumes of flame coming out the back flew into a universe dotted with planets more or less like Earth. I still find a guilty pleasure in this sort of thing – that's why I like Jack Vance so much. He's not Mr Scientifically Correct but he's a superb writer. I wanted a universe that was

has resisted the urge to store them for re-submission at a later date.

"If you accept the analogy of novels being a writer's children, who wants to shove their children in a cardboard box?"

So he's offered four manuscripts online for free: two works for younger readers *Saucerers and Gondoliers* and its sequel *Sister Ships and Alastair*; and two adult SF novels *Smallworld* and the wildly entertaining *Abaddon* (homepage.ntlworld.com/lumfylomax/).

"*Abaddon* started out as a simple idea. It asks what if the Bottomless Pit of the Book of Revelation really did exist? Where could it exist? What would its effect have been on history? How could it be explained? If stories involve willing suspension of disbelief, our first duty is to make the fantasy world as similar to the real world as possible. I used to be a programmer, and customising an existing working program involves making the smallest change necessary to achieve the desired effect – in fact, I believe that's a phrase from Asimov. In *The End of Eternity*, the Minimum

No miraculous rescue

The self deprecating charm that informs Green's conversation is an integral part of his writing. His most unsettling and complex ideas are leavened with effortless wit and fascinating story arcs. And, as we talk, it becomes clear that the secret of his success in this respect lies in his refusal to see the role of writer as a transmitter of privileged perceptions. Green wears his formal learning lightly, but he knows his stuff and knows exactly what he doesn't like.

"Percy B. Shelley gave us 'Ozymandias', but he also gave us 'On launching some bottles filled with Knowledge into the Bristol Channel', a poem which clearly indicates that, before he filled his bottles with Knowledge, he'd mainlined their former contents. I don't claim to have Knowledge that lesser human beings don't have. I did a whole bunch of bloody awful jobs in the early nineties recession, among people who had virtually no educational qualifications at all, and you know what? They could do their jobs just as well as I

could, and better. Granted, their jobs often involved lifting package A off machine B onto machine C and repeating for eight hours, but that's not the point.

"Shelley believed he could illuminate distant benighted populations by sending them artsy notes folded up in bottles. At least I *know* my stories are bullshit. Stories are lies, after all – real life doesn't have happy endings, daring last-minute rescues, conversations where people don't interrupt one another, and space drives that push on the Holy Spirit. But I like to think my lies are white ones.

"My favourite *Babylon 5* episode was the one where John Sheridan is in prison, undergoing torture, and *it lasts the whole episode*. You know how long the programme lasts, you're checking your watch thinking, crikey, they're cutting it a bit fine with the rescue here. But then the episode ends, *and he's still in prison*. The message is clear. For people in prison all the way round the world, really undergoing torture, there is no last minute reprieve, and there is no miraculous rescue. That's why *Babylon 5* beats *Star Trek* till *Star Trek* cries like a little girl."

So is Green telling us these white lies simply to entertain us, or is there an intention to provoke as well? What does he want from his readers?

"Writing is like going for a really big shit. It's in there, and it has to come out. And when it does, your own always smells a lot better than anyone else's. I suppose a woman might compare it to having a child inside her that really needs to be born. I'm a man, so I'll compare it to having a shit. Why not? There are any number of reasons *why* it has to come out, of course. Anger. Fear. Reading other people's stuff and thinking 'I could write something like that so much better'. Reading other, better people's stuff and thinking 'I really want to try to write something like that'. The poignancy of a failed love affair. The desolate horror of the dream of the night before. An idea that is so cool you have to put it down on paper. A world 20 kilometres across with Earth-like surface gravity. A hole that goes down forever.

"I don't think my lies seek to educate. Rather, I think they seek to reach like-minded people who say to themselves 'Yes! That is the way it would be'. In the event of Britain having an interstellar colony, it would be a bit crap, things wouldn't work very well, and we would end up sponging off the Americans. In the event of a technology existing that could be turned

into a weapon that would destroy the world, yes, some bright spark would build one."

Green clearly relishes SF that takes its audience into uncomfortable places. I ask if he characterises his outlook as essentially optimistic or pessimistic.

"I'm so tempted to say pessimistic. In the early 1990s, it really did seem as though the world was about to sort itself out. Apartheid was over, the Berlin Wall had fallen, Russian and American ships had sailed *together* in the Persian Gulf against Saddam Hussein.

"Then everything changed. Sure, America decided to appoint a warm blanchmange in a suit as their commander in chief, but that just seemed to illustrate the underlying Cthulhoid horror of the whole ghastly arrangement. We vote for leaders and expect them to run the world, but they are doing nothing of the sort. Instead, they are hanging on for dear life trying not to get thrown by a Malthusian nightmare that is galloping out of control. On the other hand, it is kind of cool watching it all fall to pieces."

I know Green has expressed deep concern at the increasingly crass and monolithic nature of our 'official' culture so I suspect his sense of amused bewilderment at the chaos of the human condition is cut with a darker emotion. I ask to what extent his work is informed by an angry response to folly and turmoil.

"When I started writing, straight out of college, I was convinced all the right-on chaps who went to demonstrations against globalisation were really only doing it to get it on with right-on girls, and as most of them seem to have become merchant bankers since then, I'm pretty sure I've been vindicated. But as I get older, I'm turning into them – apart from the fact that I still don't want to sleep with women with hairy legs. I started out in writing by trying to stick the boot into the daft things people on the bus come out with that made my blood boil, and that I hoped made other people's blood boil too. My personal favourite is 'Gosh, I sure am glad nothing bad like the Holocaust is happening in the world today'.

"And even where rebellion is present in the world today, it's pre-packaged to fit the big media houses' idea of what rebellion should look like – compare Pink with Jello Biafra. And another thing, Iggy Pop. *Iggy Pop* is on my TV screen telling me to buy car insurance. Truly, the ravens have left the Tower."

Dominic Green's Interzone Stories

Moving Mysteriously
#108, June 1996

Evertrue Carnadine
#112, October 1996

Everywhen
#118, April 1997

The Cozumel Incident
#121, July 1997

Queen of the Hill
#130, April 1998

That Thing Over There
#132, June 1998

Dream Blue Murder
#145, July 1999

Something Chronic
#159, September 2000

Rude Elves and Dread Norse
Reindeer
#162, December 2000

Grass
#168, June 2001

Queen of Hearts
#173, November 2001

Blue Water, Grey Death
#175, January 2002

News from Hilaria
#179, May 2002

Heavy Ice
#187, March 2003

The Rule of Terror
#189, May/June 2003

Send Me a Mentagram
#192, November/December 2003

The Clockwork Atom Bomb
#198, May/June 2005

Butterfly Bomb
#223, July/August 2009

Coat of Many Colours
#223, July/August 2009

Glister
#223, July/August 2009

Greg Egan keeps a comprehensive *Interzone* index on our website:
ttapress.com/interzone/egan_index



ILLUSTRATED BY
DANIEL BRISTOW-BALEY

"I've wanted to write 'Glister' for a long time – about twenty years. I have a complete lack of confidence in my fellow man. After all, I'm one of him.

"Pacts with the devil (okay, alleged pacts with the devil) produced as evidence at witchcraft trials were supposed to include a self-damning act to seal the bargain. The devil delivered his side of the deal, as long as you signed the document in the blood of a freshly slaughtered big-eyed orphan. Would we, as a species, take that bargain?"

DOMINIC GREEN

GLISTER

IT WAS ONE S.I. HOUR AFTER DAWN. ALTHOUGH the deceptive marshmallow carpet filling in Hell's Point was glowing brilliant white in the steadily rising sun, Midas's primary was still well under the horizon. I knew this, because I had been standing out in the open for over two hours, and I was still not dead.

As Dark Companion was still on the other side of Midas, dragging all the world's seas with it, I had a solution to that problem. There was now no water between me and the bottom of Hell's Point, three vertical kilometres downwards, and at this time of year, if I went in head first, I'd be certain to break my neck rather than floundering encased in ooze while things I couldn't see ate my face. The ooze might even be dry, cracked mud, though that was unlikely at any time of year. Hell's Point had originally been named Hellespont by a human explorer with a classical education. The name had degenerated over time – or perhaps become more accurate. Every Spring Tide, the pull of two stars, one living, one dead, combined to send all of Midas's oceans thundering up this narrow channel, sometimes high enough to bubble out over the galena plateau it cut through. The Crashing Bore. I'd seen rocks the size of condominiums rolling around in it like flotsam.

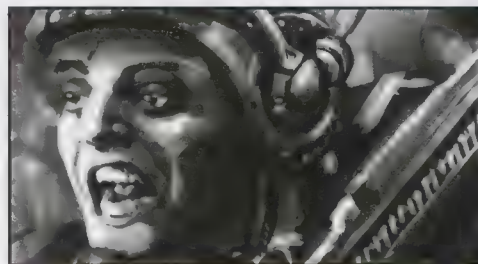
And for the rest of the year, Hell's Point was simply a vertical, dizzying crack in the earth to the base of which no sunlight and virtually no gamma penetrated. Occasional foolish noobs still made very temporary settlements in it. The Robinsonade Guaranteed Lashup Company, more sensibly, had slung wire ropes across it and made a suspension bridge connecting Chrystopia Fields to Gulvellir Forest.

At least I wasn't still in Chrystopia Fields.

It was a long, long way down. I could see clouds drifting beneath me.

It was, in fact, almost annoying when I heard Brad's concerned voice behind me: "What are you doing out here, skipper?"

I turned to her ruefully, grinning out a mouth full of rotten Robinsonade teeth. "Asking myself the same question."



I'd had a ship once. I still *had* a ship, in fact, sitting mouldering amid a thousand others in the heavy metal muck of Despond Slough. A ship that was now useless to me.

I'd bought the ship in a savage downturn in the ship market. She was a slaver, purpose built to carry human beings alive-if-unhappy out of human space into the Proprietor worlds. Unlike the slavers you've heard about in dramatic exposés and shockumentaries, this one had waste disposal, galley spaces, and rotational gravity. She'd been built by the old United States of America to dispose of its antisocial elements. But the bottom had dropped out of the market once New Topia had started producing its first made-for-slavery clones. New Topia was one hundred light years closer to the Proprietor homeworlds; there was no way the old inner systems could compete. Thousands of tonnes of prime product ended up dumped on inhospitable, marginally habitable planets and given a freedom it neither wanted nor needed.

I'd intended to revamp the *Marcus Crassus* as an economy transit shuttle. With only the removal of half a metre of radiation shielding from the outer hull and the addition of a whole load of DANGER – DEATH CAN RESULT FROM EXPOSURE TO VACUUM stickers on the airlock doors, I'd meet U.N. regulations for carrying fee paying passengers. That is, if I kept off the main shipping lanes, the economical lanes, the lanes big starlines monopolized because they made the money.

Have you seen the wee bijou flaw in my business plan yet?

The family home had had to go, of course. For over a thousand years, my ancestors had maintained it, steadily surrounded by soaring blocks of what the European Housing Directorate proudly called 'VUV', which stands for 'Vertical Urban Villages'. We'd defended it against Wallace, Longshanks, Cromwell, and Bonnie Prince Charlie, depending on whose side we were on at the time; but we'd been unable to defend it against my own temptation. The land was at a premium; it was time to sell.

So the McQuarrie family seat had been bought by a sympathetic landgrab consortium that had promised to put up a new building 'in keeping with the original site'. How it was going to do that in geodesic gunnite, I had no idea, though I believe parts of Kinlochbeul Castle's west front now adorn their corporate headquarters in Liège. Once I'd exchanged family home for ship, I'd only had to add seventeen other postgrad qualifications to my solitary biochemistry degree before those same U.N. regulations would allow me anywhere near a spaceship.

In any case, that was how I and the newly renamed *Kinlochbeul Castle* ended up on the ninth planet of Atlas A, 440 light years from Earth. Atlas A is a blue giant star, part of the Pleiades Cluster, and its light hurts the eyes. The natives are a curious lot, a race who shouldn't by rights exist. Their star's age, after all, is measured in millions of years rather than billions – they haven't had *time* to evolve intelligence. The odds are heavily against there being life on their world, let alone civilization. That's why few ships ever explore the parts of the Network that come out near massive stars. Life isn't often found there. There's no-one to buy from or sell to, and no-one to buy or sell. If anyone is doing anything out near such stars, it's dredging heavy metals. Giant stars swim in a soup of the stuff.

The Jackinaboxes are protected from their own giant star by an atmosphere hundreds of miles in depth. Their world is still on

the cool side of turning Venusian, however. It does occasionally rain enough sulphuric acid to dissolve a small child, but then, I hear it does that in Beijing these days too. The 'boxes are called 'boxes because they have the ability, in an aquafortis storm, to instantly deflate their pneumatic skeletons and coil up inside their acid-resistant braincases, like a cartoon character folding up into his hat. They do this if they're startled too, sometimes prompting sociopathic Scots visitors to yell at them suddenly purely for the evil fun of it.

Gravity is high on Atlas A9, and cloud cover is constant. For that reason, those few 'boxes who ever managed to scale the heights of Nine's immense cloud-piercing mountain ranges became a class apart, scientist and priesthood together squashed into one hat or box. Their planetary religion – and there was only one, it having spread very quickly and utterly mercilessly – centred around astronomical observation. It was boosted to new levels when the priesthood contacted beings from other worlds, flying down from the sky in great white birds that farted tongues of flame. This is where I come in.

In actual fact, by the time *Kinlochbeul Castle* arrived on Nine, they'd discovered spaceflight and built over one hundred telescopes the size of Vertical Urban Villages in Nine-stationary orbit, but the great white bird idea is more poetic. In any case, I'd stocked up on glass beads in case I ran into any sophonts on my wanderings, and I had a storage locker full of weapons grade plutonium. Medicines don't work from biochemistry to biochemistry, cultural artefacts that are beautiful to one species leave another cold, but *everyone* loves weapons grade plutonium. The 'boxes' civilization ran on it. Their world hadn't had life long enough to acquire fossil fuel deposits, so existence was wind- and muscle-powered for the peasantry, nuclear-powered for the astronomer-aristocracy.

But what did these creatures have to offer in return?

In answer, I'd been led into a room of gold.

Now, I'll grant that gold is a whole lot less rare than it used to be. We have machines for digesting whole asteroids and crapping out the stuff, and filtering it out of sea water. But the energy expended in dragging a tonne of gold the length of ten or eleven solar systems, the average length of voyage we're talking node-to-node out to the Chi Lupi goldfields, still makes it valuable, and the astronomarchs' treasure room was a wonder to behold. White gold interlaid with red interlaced with rose interwoven with black mapped out the heavens, the black gold rendered by nanoscale indents in the metal cut by laser to absorb all light, making it the deep black of vacuum. They'd alloyed gold with aluminium to pick out purple stars, with silver to produce greens, with copper to make pinks. The Pleiades gas clouds had been rendered most lovingly of all, in hand-hammered, blade-thin blue gold sheets with LEDs behind them, shining bright.

The first thing I noticed was that all the stars were in the wrong place. Their world might be young, but their civilization was old, old enough for only the lead stars in the Pleiades to have begun pushing bow waves into the Maia Nebula.

I remarked on the amount of gold. They asked me, the boneless bastards, whether gold was a thing I was interested in. They claimed gold was a commonplace to them, which was odd, as I hadn't seen any jangling on the peasants in the fields. They offered me an obscenely large amount of it, enough to fill my ship, or

alternatively, they could offer me the knowledge of where they got their gold. They seemed to have latched on to one human proverb, which they used a great deal. The proverb was *give a man a fish, and he will eat for a day. Teach him how to fish, and he eats for life*. I suppose I should have asked them where they'd learned the proverb.

Bastards.

Their gold, they said, came from a world orbiting further out in the Atlas A system. It was known by then, of course, that Atlas A had a miniature companion far smaller than the equally gigantic Atlas B, though the companion was far too dim and dense to be anything other than a brown dwarf, neutron star or collapsar. In a tight orbit around this companion, the 'boxes said, anchored in place by star-sized gravity, was a world where *gold could be made to walk into the smelter*. What did they mean by that? They gave away nothing. But they were perfectly prepared to *sell* me, for my entire cargo of plute, a set of pusher drives powered by micronuclear explosions, effectively a Dædalus drive of the sort human beings had envisaged using for travelling from solar system to solar system back in the way-back-when. Of course, human beings had ended up doing nothing of the sort, as we'd discovered the Node system that had allowed us to travel faster than light for free. But Atlas A's dark companion had no Node. Evidently the Nodebuilders had not been interested in gold. And the companion star, if star it was, was as far away from Atlas A9 as Jupiter from the Sun. Only the companion's own dim radiation kept the planet warm.

It would be a year there, and a year back. But they guaranteed me as much gold as I could get back to A9 with (which I should have realized potentially included, in the event of my not being able to get back to A9 at all, the amount *no gold at all*). They sold me the tools to mine the gold, and a miniature cyanide plant for refining the ore. In under three years' time, I would be set for life.

.....
"Careful, Yuri, you'll spook him. The last thing we want's a sympathetic detonation of the whole herd."

Yuri, clearly visible in deep camouflage on the other side of the herd of chrysolopes, hissed into his radio: "The last thing I am wanting, Alasdair, is for him to charge me. He must be massing over three hundred kilos. That is one hundred kilos of xenonogold ester bound up in his big fat hairy ass. If I am needing to put a bullet in him at close range the blast will blow the slug back up my pipe and my face round the other side of my head. If anyone is getting spooked here, it is me."

The chrysolopes were one of the few herds remaining in our area – one of the few remaining in the whole of Gulvellir Forest. They stood shoulder-high at the shoulder, and had magnificent dorsal crests that would fluoresce visibly at Hard Dawn if Atlas A were still below the horizon, metabolizing warmth for the beasts out of high energy x- and gamma-rays that would kill a human being on contact. They had no natural weapons; they needed none.

Many years ago on Earth, chemists had discovered xenon and gold would form cationic complexes; out by Atlas A we'd found out they'd form polymers. The chrysolopes' fat deposits, an essential defence against winter cold that could freeze dry ice out of the air, were not made of carbon/hydrogen triesters, but

freakish xenonogold analogues. Noble gases and noble metals are very difficult to put together and very, very easy to convince to come apart. How the 'lopes synthesized such materials inside themselves was anyone's guess – no zoologist had taken the trouble to get close enough to a live 'lope to examine it. Almost certainly, though, it was something to do with the high energy photons they collected in their dorsal crests. Dead 'lope flesh also stank of fluorine and burned incautious fingers; the noble molecules were stable only in the presence of fluoride counterions. And they weren't that stable in any event. The fat deposits on a chrysolope, besides keeping it warm through a long hard winter, were several orders more explosive than nitroglycerine, plastique or that other gold compound known to mediaeval alchemists, *aurum fulminans*. The chrysolopes' natural defence was to explode if you messed with them. Or, in occasional cases, if they farted too hard.

High above, green lamina of auroras rippled in the evening sky. Dark Companion could not be seen, but its position could be inferred from its terrible gravitomagnetic effects on all matter around it. Only the fact that we were still inside the Pleiades cluster made stars visible through the aurorae, and there were aurorae even where we were, close to the equator. Across the clearing, a patch of Hackle Grass was standing up in the increased magnetic field. Companion-rise was approaching. We needed to nail the herd leader and go to ground, get a metre of earth between ourselves and hard gamma.

"Easy with the LED pipe, Yuri, or you'll be the one scraping up everything that's left of him into a bucket. But we need to get this done quickly. There's a tzee hereabouts, a big one. I saw its foot-craters a quarter kilometre back."

The radio scoffed in my ear. "Tzee feet are smaller than the craters they are making. They are just travelling fast."

I took a swig from the sweetwater canteen at my belt. Water, water everywhere was dripping on my head out of the rain jungle, but there was no way of knowing whether it *was* rain or whether it had dripped out of some form of Midas plant life, in which case it would give me heavy metal poisoning and cause organ shutdown weeks in my future. "I'm less concerned with the size of its feet and more with the size of the hole it'll leave in me. A 'lope factory dozer up near Oro Que Camina had its crew killed to a man by one."

"They probably provoked it. We're not their natural prey."

"'Lopes aren't *our* natural prey, but we're doing a hell of a job on them anyway. The tzee've started trailing the hunting teams. They don't take down 'lopes normally because 'lope and tzee are an explosive combination, but if they find a carcass, they'll leave the fat and scoff the muscle and organs. Guy back at Croesus Station said they've started getting hungry enough to dart in and take flesh off the one side of the bone when a roboprocessor's already stripping the other. We're killing everything in their food chain. That's got to piss a life form off."

"I have the bull in sight now...just a couple more metres..."

"Brad, spook the rest of them. I don't want them anywhere near him if your ex runs him into something hard enough to set him off..."

The LED pipe was my own design, although, in actual fact, it was an adaptation of a twenty-first century invention. It fired dazzlingly brilliant pulses of laser light, not enough to perma-

nently blind, but enough to cause a human being to keel over clutching his eyeballs and losing his lunch at the same time. We'd had to experiment to work out the correct frequencies for Midasite species, many of whom, for obvious reasons, were able to see well into the x-ray spectrum and even, in some cases, into the gamma. Our machine now had two reliable settings – human and chrysolope. The human setting delivered light at a group of wavelengths that could be accurately described as taupe, which I had long suspected to be the colour of the Devil. Chrysolopes, meanwhile, kingly beasts that they were, preferred the purplest of purples; once hit in the eye with a LED beam, the beasts would fall to the ground in blank confusion, and once down, a fully grown 'lope had great difficulty getting up again. The stag would be ours to tranquillize and liposuck. Then, in an hour's time, he'd be bounding away, scared and confused but alive to grow a fresh layer of fat for next year. This was our grand plan for perpetuating the herds whilst allowing us to drain off our regular bucket of blood. We could get up to a hundred kilos of fatoid from a fully grown 'lope, which equated to forty-five kilos of gold. Truth to tell, we just hadn't got the heart to kill the beasts. We were city kids (well, I was a city kid. But I'm pretty sure Brad and Yuri hadn't seen a cow or pig close up till they were in college, much less killed one).

Still, it beat being down in Chrystopia Fields. *Anything* beat being down in Chrystopia Fields.

"Almost have him...but there is a tree in my line of fire..."

"Take the shot, Yuri. He's close enough to that tree to lose it in his forward blind spot anyway. That's why the hammerheaded bastard's so close to it."

"It won't work, you can't see it right from your angle..."

"Take the shot –"

Someone took the shot. The chrysolope stag disappeared in a blinding orange flash. When I raised myself back up onto my elbows, there was 'lope blood all over my binoculars. The blood was a dull orange colour, the colour of vomit. Worse were the fatoid deposits, releasing raw fluorine as soon as they detonated, hydrofluoric shrapnel causing the trees to hiss around me. I was glad the binocular lenses were polyethylene-coated.

I knew who'd taken the shot.

"Jesus –" That was Yuri, who was still alive, no thanks to –

"Balak, you utter, utter wanker."

A voice cackled through my earphones on the same channel we'd been using to talk to Yuri. "Sorry about that, McQuarrie. Trigger finger slipped. Our herd, our hunting ground. If we can't have him, no-one will."

Brad's hand fell on my shoulder, and she hissed into my ear: "Careful. You know how many guns he has working for him. We can't see them. But they can probably see us."

Brad stands for Bradamante. It's a made-up mediaeval romance name, like being called Lancelot, only for girls. Brad's parents were Filipinos from a sea floor *submarino* settlement. You know a place is bad when it's named after a form of torture. Brad's *submarino* was so infra dig it had a number rather than a name. Brad's mother had dreamed of her daughter standing bareheaded under a sun, any sun, breathing unrecycled air. Sometimes her fantasies had run to Brad riding mighty horses through virgin forest and very possibly robbing the rich to feed the poor – hence the name. She was eventually committed, but

hey, a gal can dream.

"He's all over the landscape now. We're trying to *save* these beasts so we can *keep* farming them for gold –"

The radio cackled again. "Me, I'm trying to kill as many of 'em as possible. Don't much care for saving 'em. Got plenty of non-explosive rounds for all the does and fauns. Then it's back to Earth and a tropical paradise of my own. I'm thinking Madagascar."

"You've spooked the whole of the rest of the herd! They'll be miles away by now!"

"We've got technology on our side. *Nothing* can outrun an electric car." Designed for use in prospecting asteroids, 'Roid Rovers had had to be extensively modified to be any use in gravity this heavy. One tonne weights had to be removed from their centres of gravity, to begin with.

"Leave it, Alasdair," whispered Brad. "We already have over two hundred kilos of fatoid." She was remarkably forgiving, considering Balak had just narrowly missed detonating her ex-husband. Yuri had come from a Russian sea-floor settlement in the Arctic; the way Brad and Yuri had met had been the stuff of Brad's mother's romances. Both trainee comms operators, they had heard one another's voices on VLF radio, and despite a thousand miles of separation, fallen in love. After they had finally met face to face, more prosaic things such as Brad's gat teeth and Yuri's bald head and belly had come to the fore. They were divorced on our third journey out to Canis. Once they were divorced, they got along a whole lot better, and their sex life seemed to have improved.

"And that buys us what, in Robinsonade? A couple of nights' stay at a hotel I wouldn't piss in back on Earth? A couple of square meals we know won't give us heavy metal poisoning?" I tore off the radio earpiece and threw it down in disgust. "And now the whole herd's dead in any case. And we've been tailing it for *months*."

"Maybe the fauns will run clear. Maybe we can save Li'l Truck Bomb." Li'l Truck Bomb was my favourite, a gawky, fifty-kilo foal who I'd watched slithering out of the egg sac only weeks ago. He was already bigger and stronger than many of the older males around him, and looked set to become an alpha even bigger than his father.

Far off in the ever-present mist, we could hear low-velocity rounds popping off, aimed for heart shots and maximum bleed. Balak's crew were practised at this – we heard none of the does exploding. Warning squeaks issued from the 'lopelets on the fringes of the herd – their parents didn't protect them for the first week after birth, and it was their job, by erecting brightly coloured crests like flamenco fans, to act as Distant Early Warning. But Balak's team weren't ignoring the juveniles any more than they were the alphas, betas and does, and 'lopelets were scattering pell-mell through the trees like a heron in a box of frogs, being taken down in mid-air *for no reason at all*, unless the shooters thought they needed the practice. 'Lopelets didn't grow substantial fat deposits at this time in the long year round Atlas A. No profit would be gained by shooting them; but the herd would die. I could already see, in the middle distance, a processing dozer flinging chunks of bleeding orange flesh hither and yon in a blur of waldo arms. They had already started to carve up the fallen. Seventy-five per cent of the kill would almost certainly be lost in payment for booze, food, fuel and

tail for the team back at Robinsonade. A good deal of the rest would be needed to pay for jerry-building whatever device they were planning to use to boost them back to Atlas A. So far we had no proof anyone had ever made that trip successfully. Dark Companion's magnetic field made radio communication with Atlas A impossible, but every Midasite who'd made the trip knew the drill – to shine back a laser beam at the frequency of one of the Fraunhofer absorption bands for gold when Midas was at periatlasion, to let everyone else know they'd made it, that the journey home was feasible. No such signal had ever been received. Whether the jury-rigged nuclear blast engines had given out or the Jackinaboxes had taken to sandbagging returning prospectors, we had no idea. But no matter – our local engineers were getting more ingenious by the day. Soon we would be able to solve the problem that had killed all our fusion drives – the lack of any form of helium on Midas to cool the superconductors. Helium was relatively common in the Solar System, but out here, gold walked around in tonne-sized chunks, and helium was a rare earth.

And then he came, tearing out of the nearest thicket at our hide as if he'd always known it was there, moving with incredible speed for a three-legged creature. Brad had fed him by hand when he'd been a 'lopelet, and he charged for her, pursued by tracer fire. The rounds produced by Robinsonade's geegaw armaments industry were inaccurate, and gave a sufficiently small and agile target an even chance of evading a bullet. Brad had no heart to shoot him while he was outside our danger space, and then he was *inside* our danger space and had leapt up into her arms, knocking her over. When he'd been ever so cute and small, he'd been able to get away with the manoeuvre. Now he stood over her looking down, his retractable eyes out on their horns in puzzlement.

I could see men trundling our way through the trees, bringing their 'ROID Rovers to a stop, home-made weapons rising to their shoulders. I saw Yuri stand up suddenly in front of one, take his weapon off him, and beat him viciously about the head, forearms and balls with it. The others switched their aim from Li'l Truck Bomb to Yuri.

Without thinking, I flicked a laser pointer up; it hit one of them dead in the eye. He shielded his face and waved to his companions to back off. He knew what would have followed the laser beam if anything had happened to Yuri. The laser beam's big brother. I'd made the laser harquebus out of a cutting torch designed for use in zero gravity. It was almost too heavy to lift around down here, but the beam would leave a hole in a man big enough for him not to feel a tank shell if it came after.

Unfortunately, we also only had the one harquebus, and they had considerably more of their less exotic weapons. Within a second, I had also broken out in a bad case of laser dots. Brad, who was still wearing her headset, said: "Take the pointer off him, Alasdair. Balak is telling you to. He says there'll be what he describes as 'consequences' if you don't."

"They can take their guns off Yuri first," I said, whilst getting the odd feeling I was listening to some distant suicidal idiot saying it. But Balak might shoot Yuri anyway if I lowered the gun. He was that sort of nice fun guy. I wasn't sure how long I could hold the heavy barrel up in any case. This might all be academic.

And then the man I had the dot on, and down whose barrel

I was looking, disappeared in a puff of blood and bile. I could actually smell the gut acid. Something had hit him so fast that it had burst his stomach like a balloon. He was falling to the ground *and had not hit it yet* before the next man to his left died. And the next. And the next. All I saw of how it happened was a blur, occasionally and tantalizingly decelerating into a suggestion of shape, of multilegged, low-slung, springloaded-limbed efficiency. Red laser threads were swinging confused through the mist, searching for an enemy that was already elsewhere.

I heard Balak's voice fulminating from the grass and snatched up my headset again.

"That what I thought it was, McQuarrie?"

"I think so. It killed three of your men and went to ground."

There was a moment's silence.

"You're a very lucky man, McQuarrie."

I grinned. "Don't have enough guns left to finish us off reliably, huh."

"I'll deal with you later. I'm not in the habit of sticking around where there's a rogue tzee."

"Neither is a rogue tzee," said Yuri. "You only ever see where they were, not where they are. I'd get the hell out of here quickly if I were you, Balak, or if it doesn't get you, I will –"

"Thank you for that. I now know which of you to do this to."

A shot sounded; Yuri yelped and dropped to one knee, hands clasped around the other one. Blood seeped from between his fingers.

"Be seeing you. Tzee like wounded prey, so I hear. They're like cats. They like to play. Gives me time to make my exit. Nothing personal." I heard a sound of backward scuttling through undergrowth. The radio clicked, and there was nothing more but static.

"Where is it now?" whispered Brad. "Anything moving at that speed would send the underbrush flying."

"Common wisdom has it tzee probably need to cool down after they move," I said. "It might have flopped into a stream or something."

"What do tzee look like, you know," said Brad, "standing still?"

I shrugged. "No-one knows. No-one's ever seen one do that. No-one's ever even found bones. We don't even think they *have* bones. It's a mystery how they're held together. They're named after a creature in an old Earth novel. A creature that kills so quickly nobody ever sees it. I'm going to see to Yuri."

"Yuri's injured. Balak said tzee *like* injured prey."

"Balak doesn't know what tzee do any more than I know what nymphomaniac bikini models do. Besides, if they go for injured prey, it'll be going for him, not me."

"Thanks. That really reassures me."

The clearing was only a hundred yards across, but it felt like walking the Sahara. Yuri was lying on his back, still clutching his knee. It wasn't bleeding too badly. No major blood vessels seemed to have been severed. "I think the bastard took out my kneecap," he said.

"We'll get you a shiny new one," I said. "Gold titanium alloy. Incorrodable. Indestructible."

He appeared to smile, though he was probably gritting his teeth. "Don't be stupid...where are you going to find titanium around here?"

The undergrowth exploded again in a shower of leaves some

distance away to my left. I'd read that it was very difficult to knock a leaf off a tree. Of course, that probably applied to Earth leaves and Earth trees. Had one of Balak's men still been alive and injured, and was he alive no longer? "Keep still," I said. "I have enough morphine in this one syringe to make a bull elephant see other, pinker bull elephants."

"It won't make me able to walk."

"Agreed. You're not going to walk. You're not going to move." I looked out into the now motionless undergrowth. "As soon as you start moving, moving *broken*, it'll attack again. It'll find you interesting. Keep still and you're boring."

He exhaled so ecstatically as the syringe went in that I felt as if I were committing a homosexual act. "But it'll eat me...oh, that feels *gooooood*..."

Two more bushes detonated close by. Leaves drifted across our faces. "It evolved to eat life forms with biochemistries so full of heavy metals their meat tastes like licking cutlery," I said. "If it takes a bite out of us it'll probably die. It's not like a rogue lion. It hasn't suddenly discovered human beings taste good. It's more like a rogue pussy cat. It's suddenly discovered tormenting human beings is fun."

I backed away gingerly from Yuri.

"Don't leave," he said.

I picked up the LED pipe from where he'd let it fall and pressed it back into his hands. It was not as heavy as the harquebus, but not as accurate either. It might also be useless against a tzee. Human eyes and insect eyes had completely different visible spectra, after all, and they came from the same world. The chrysolope setting might not work on other Midas animals. I turned round slowly, searching the trees around me for stuff I didn't know how to look for. Stuff that moved too fast to see.

Too fast to see...

"Yuri, turn the strobe effect up on the LED pipe. Way up. As high as it'll go. And set it to maximum dispersal."

He fumbled with the settings. "Which one's the strobe?"

"Metal rheostat on the left hand side, big as your thumb. I didn't have time to make it fancy."

"Check. Uh...what do you want me to do now?"

"I'm going to walk away from you. I want you to sight up on me and shoot me."

"Why?"

I inhaled through gritted teeth. "Because I'm where it's going to be."

Before he could object, or ruin our friendship by not objecting, I started limping theatrically away from him, dragging one leg along behind me like a dead weight.

I heard nothing. Hardly surprising, of course – I was making far too much noise myself, moving like this, to hear anything sneaking up. I felt faintly ridiculous. These woods, albeit these spine-leaved *alien* woods, had never before felt like anything sinister might lurk within them. Anything that didn't walk around on two legs, that was.

I only had time to flick my head sideways to see it; a clear line of collapsing vegetation streaking directly toward me. The LED pipe flared behind me like another sun. There was a sound like a crowbar jammed in an electric fan, and *something* blurred into existence, skidding out of control through the thicket. Then there was a sickening *crack* like wood breaking, and the blur

became solid, wrapped right round a tree stump like a fox fur.

I looked down at it. It was over twice the length of a man, and shaped like a sine wave, except where the tree had spoilt the effect. Occasionally, it broke into claws and teeth and, so help me, horns. Less like horns, in fact, than the bill on the front of a swordfish.

"Don't want to lose it at speed," I said.

Behind me, I could hear a regular wet thumping sound – I turned to see Yuri, his head striking rhythmically against a tree root, drool coming from the corner of his mouth.

"Yuri! Yuri! It got Yuri!" Brad rushed out of the woods, heedless of the possibility that there might be a hunting pack of tzee rather than just the one. For a divorced lady, she was certainly concerned for her ex-husband's welfare.

"No it didn't. The strobe was just turned up too high for safety. I figured tzee eyes had to re-render their environment far more times per second than ours do, or they wouldn't be able to run through the woods that fast. Yuri must be susceptible to high frequency strobe. He's just having an epileptic fit. The same thing that happened to the tzee. Only it was travelling at a hundred kilometres per hour when it had one."

"Just having an epileptic fit?"

"Put something soft underneath his head, he'll probably be fine."

As I turned back round to it, the tzee's body vibrated so rapidly that its flesh became as substantial as a hummingbird's wing. This was also vibrating all the swords and claws, centimetres from my nose. I gave it a light squirt from the harquebus to pacify it, being not overly concerned about nonlethal force at this point. Blood blasted back out of it onto my trigger hand. The blood felt like salt in an open wound. I yelped and jumped backwards, felling a tree with the harquebus in panic.

I was uncomfortably aware that Brad was already pointing a gun in my direction.

"Don't panic, I'm okay. But the blood...its blood *burns*."

Stupidly, Brad walked over, dabbed a finger in the blood on my hand, licked it, and said: "No it doesn't."

Experimentally, I tried the same thing with my off hand. "You're right. You're right. Why are you right?"

"Don't look at me like me being right is a weird thing, chief."

"I don't mean it like that. Anyhow, we need to get Yuri below ground now. We've got under an hour to build a shelter with a metre of earth cover. We haven't got time to dig down, we'll have to cut turf and make a lean-to. We'll build it round him. Go get the Rover. He'll be okay. He's just fitting. He'll stop fitting. Probably. *Run*."

She hesitated, searching for reasons to object, found none, and raced away.

"I still don't see why we have to tote this stinky piece of offal with us."

"That is a terrible way to talk about your ex-husband."

"Don't say bad things about him while he's too far gone to hear," said Brad. Behind her, Yuri cooed and chortled softly in his opium dream.

She had, of course, been talking about the tzee carcass. I'd trussed it up with wire and slung it in the back of the tractor. No-one had ever properly seen a tzee. I'd told Brad it would make

us local celebrities in Croesus and Robinsonade. We might dine out on it. Certainly it would be slim pickings otherwise – we'd come home with no fatoid in our hoppers.

The tractor, on autopilot, had taken us down out of Gulvellir woods into more populated country where people could see what people were doing to other people. There was little danger of anyone shooting anyone else in the back down here; I could stop checking how close my gun hand was to the harquebus every ten seconds. We were safe in Chrystopia Fields. These were not our fields, of course, and not active working fields either, but dead fields, fields where live weeds were running riot, strangling crops. The crops looked, to my non-Midasite eyes, more like giant weeds than the weeds did – huge, purple-flowered, pyramidal, surrounded by bird's nests of coiling androecia, each sitting in its own appointed place on the terrace.

Down here, it was so possible for people to see what was being done to other people that the memory might never be erased.

Gulvellir Forest wasn't a wild area. It was a hunting preserve. Every tree had been planted deliberately – artfully, even. The place showed signs of landscaping. Further down-plateau, Chrystopia Fields was what the rest of the world looked like.

They had built irrigation channels down from reservoirs in the hills to water the fields, which also grew a crop with thick stilt roots that lifted itself clear of the water, like a mangrove. They had taken a plant that evidently habitually grew in the massive tidal shallows that took up half the planet and learned how to grow it a thousand kilometres inland. It had taken brains to do that.

They were lining up in hundreds in the fields, sawn, grey-skinned, often injured, limping, leaning against each other for support. Three-legged like 'lopes, moving on two sturdy forelegs and one heavy rear. Heads like Great Cthulhu, both mandible and manipulatory appendage, faces only a mother could love. And they did have mothers, having two sexes like we did, and those mothers cradled their young in those horrible tentacles. The young looked tiny, scared, trembling. They lived underground, of course, to protect themselves against Hard Day. *Had* lived underground. Their dwellings were now either being dynamited or taken over by human pioneers. The pioneers had also built the new, humane structures lined up in the fields – the ones with the long lines, the ones that looked so popular at first glance.

They felt no pain went they went into the devices. There was some sort of electric shock or chemical poison. I was unacquainted with the exact details. I had been assured by a drunken engineer, however, that no pain was involved – *probbly kint feel pain like we do anyhow*. Then the innards of the device – my engineer's pride and joy, described in over-vivid detail – went to work, reducing the body of the creature, flesh, gristle and skeleton, to mush in under a minute and squirting it into the main cyanide vat, where the gold would be removed. Up to a hundred grammes of gold could be obtained per inhabitant.

They had a system of writing based on dots placed above and below a line. They had a system of mathematical notation which allowed numbers to be expressed in multiple bases. They buried their dead.

You're saying to yourself, of course, *if gold was all around, why didn't they mine it out of the ground? Why didn't they just build giant ore processors and tear the planet apart?*

People have known for years that planets have a carbon cycle – a period of constant replenishment, by volcanic outgassing, of carbon dioxide absorbed back into the planet. Once a planet's carbon cycle finishes, complex life on that planet dies out. All the carbon gets swallowed up in the crust and never finds its way out again. What we hadn't appreciated before arriving on Midas is that big heavy metal planets have a gold cycle too. Oh, sure, life on Midas had evolved to cope with massive quantities of gold, to the extent, in fact, that it now couldn't live without it. And the gold cycle on Midas had stopped. Life had been dying out here long before we had even arrived. Now the gold was locked up deep within the planetary mantle, too deep for us to reach without a mohole. But one per cent of it was still walking around on the surface; and that one per cent was measured in megatonnes.

And if life had *already been dying out*, why not help it along a little? Where was the harm in that? Squeeze a million years of decline into a thousand! They were going to die anyway! Where was the harm?

It was an accepted fact, of course, that the good human settlers of Midas were not without consciences. For this reason, the men and women who, de facto, owned the fields had posted armed guards with sullen unforgiving eyes around the lines, in case one of the aforementioned conscientious settlers should attempt to sabotage operations. So far no-one had. If anything, the owners were guarding the fields against their *own* consciences.

I kept my gaze straight ahead, as I always did driving through the lower fields. Li'l Truck Bomb was still riding with us, standing on the centreline of the tractor on the transaxle housing, his eyestalks agog at the wonders of civilization. The stately carved galena dwellings the aboriginal Midasites had recently vacated were approaching. I could see one of the more advanced life forms that had replaced them, trousers round its ankles, squatting in its new front doorway taking a shit and smoking. It grinned and waved at us as we passed by. A gold necklace heavy enough to bludgeon a man to death with hung from it. Men carried their wealth on them in Robinsonade. It was less easy to steal.

"Where are we going to stay?" said Brad. "We don't have money for the Wendy House or Soutpiel's Kraal." Robinsonade had only occupied the very centre of the Midasite city on our journey out. Now it seemed to be expanding out into the suburbs. It was evidently taking time to process the entire population.

"We're not going to stay anywhere," I said. "We're heading straight to Uncle Kwon's Generie. We have some cloning to organize."

"Cloning," said Brad.

"The tzee's blood," I said, "burned."

"Which means what?" said Brad.

"Which is why they don't need a skeleton. Their innards are held up by their own blood pressure." I reached over to the tzee carcass, pulled the wound I'd made in it wider with my thumb. "See how thick the insulation on the skin is? They're living pressure vessels. They're boiling inside."

Brad was puzzled. "Why would they want to be like that?"

"They wouldn't. It's a side effect of their muscles transmitting that much power. The waste heat has to go somewhere."

"Skipper, tell me what this has to do with cloning or I'm going to shoot you myself."

"Everything on Midas uses gold compounds in its biochemistry. And one of the uses of gold is in superconductors. A lot of the sea life up near Midas's poles uses superconducting magnets in place of conventional muscle fibre. Tracer squid, those really bright bullet-shaped things that skip out of the sea on wings and bioluminesce like crazy? The ones with the shoals we could see from orbit? They can only make their siphons expand and contract that quickly because their musculature superconducts. But *this* baby, *this* little ray of sunshine," I slapped the wrinkled carcass, "superconducts at high temperature. *Really* high temperature."

She stiffened. She had understood. "The coolant. The helium problem."

"All we need," I said, "is access to a biolab and decent cloning facilities. We don't *need* coolant any more. We have high temperature superconductors right here on our doorstep. All our homegoing problems are over. All *everyone's* homegoing problems are over. Of course," I said, "*we could* insist everyone buy their superconductor compound from us. For gold, of course. At a reasonable price..."

She took a look back at the fields. "I don't think so, Alasdair. I think we just equip our ship, get out of this place and leave them to their gold."

She'd persuaded me. "That's right. That's absolutely right. I was just testing you."

"Besides, what use will gold be to us? Unless you have a mountain of any metal nowadays, you're nobody."

"But a high temperature superconductor, working above the boiling point of water," I continued, "that's worth what a mountain of gold would have been worth *before* spaceflight. Gold enough to make a leprechaun green with envy!"

"Leprechauns," burbled Yuri from the back seat with admirable lucidity for a man who could probably see them by now, "are already green."

The tractor shuddered to a halt outside Uncle Kwon's, where I'd told it to. Far behind us, I watched a straight-backed, proud-statured Midasite walk into one of the field killers, holding a smaller Midasite in its tentacles. The door closed. The device hummed efficiently and did its work. The next Midasite in line stepped up.

"Just before we leave," I said, "I would like to put a home made grenade in one of those cyanide bowsers. *Poof!* Cyanide gas all over the settlement. You know it doesn't kill Midasites? Maybe they'll get the idea. The idea of how to fight back."

Brad shook her head. "The better type of Australian settler thought the same thing looking at the aborigines, Alasdair. *Maybe if they figure out how to make guns somehow. Maybe if they work out they could throw flaming boomerangs into the powder magazine.* It won't happen. They're a lame duck civilization. Their great crime is the same crime as the Africans'. To have been *useful*. They say the useless tree, the gnarled tree, the tree full of knots and twists, is always the oldest tree in the village. You know why that is?"


I shrugged. "Because old trees get like that?"

"Because *no-one ever bothered to cut it down*. Now stop philosophizing and help me get Yuri's stretcher down off the wagon."

I stepped down from the rover. In the fields outside the settlement, the doors continued to open and close, open and close, open and close.

THE TRANSMIC





ERIC GREGORY

GRATION OF AISHWARYA DESAI

ILLUSTRATED BY ARTHUR WANG

Every summer, Ganesha Colony invited a major scholar to spend a month on their outrageously monied premises, six jumps from Earth on a planet that only the wealthy could love. There were lectures and workshops, reading groups and research, and at the end of the month there was a twist.

This year, Simon Trung was the major scholar.
I was the twist.

"For lack of a better word," said Simon Trung, "my colleague and I are called anthropologists." He spoke from a grand Earth-oak podium to the Ganeshans assembled in the General Philosophy Hall. There were perhaps three hundred present, a good percentage of the colony's population, most in their late fifties or sixties. I stood at the opposite side of the stage, behind a less expensive podium.

In the final three days of the Summer Lectures, a second, rival thinker was invited to debate the Guest of Honor on the Ganeshan stage. If the upstart won, she took the lecturer's stipend, as well as bragging rights that could earn a tenured chair at any university in the worlds.

"That word," continued Trung, "is of course a misnomer: *anthropos* is only the Greek for 'human'. Whatever we have in common with traditional anthropologists, my studies and Dr Desai's are not much concerned with the human." This garnered an appreciative chuckle from the crowd. They loved a pedant. I knew where Trung was headed.

"Others in our field have proposed a range of neologisms we might adopt instead, such as 'Embedded Transplanar Xenologist'. Perhaps I'm old-fashioned, but I insist there's some value left in our familiar classification. For all its imprecision, 'anthropologist' has a certain *earthiness* I enjoy; more to the point, I'm not convinced that the other titles are any less problematic. Call me conservative, but I prefer not to be embedded on a first date."

Another round of appreciative laughter.
He smiled brightly.

At thirty-four, Trung was younger than most Guests of Honor. He held, however, the same class of credentials: a doctorate from Oxford São Paulo and dual Nobel Prizes (Peace and Chemistry). Small-statured and more or less attractive, he wore short hair and long mutton chops. His eyes, owing either to expensive genetics or expensive nanites, glowed a faint blue. The overall impression was striking.

"I apologize if I've strayed a bit outside the purview of today's debate, but I raise the questions of name and taxonomy for a reason. I want to suggest that Dr Desai has forgotten – anthropologist though she may be! – that she no longer studies man. Too often she defines *alien* behavior in *human* terms, when those terms derive from a specifically human conceptualisation of the world. We've little choice but to rely on our native

concepts, of course, but when speaking of the Other we must justify our use of human descriptors. It is on this duty, I'm afraid, that Dr Desai will be found sadly derelict."

Trung looked sidelong and smiled, like a child on a particularly excellent playground. There was no malice in it: just a sort of unabashed giddiness.

"That's all I have in the way of introduction," he said, "so I suppose I'll have to turn you over to my colleague."

His blue eyes glowed.

.....
Ordinarily I wouldn't have slept through the jumps. On trips to Yama I took a certain satisfaction in withstanding the same rigors as the jump-crew. If they could suffer bruising, double-over nausea while running simultaneous deep-q equations, well, I could certainly grit my teeth and bear it.

Six consecutive jumps, however, are a bit much for anyone, so this time I submitted to drugs and sleep. Mistake: I woke unable to move my limbs, and with an ugly beast of a migraine to boot. My whole body buzzed, the same feeling as a foot gone to sleep, and even the dim light of the cabin grated. I lay in my cot for twenty or thirty minutes before I tried to sit up, and longer still before I packed all my books and toiletries into my carry-on. A jump attendant knocked on the cabin door as I gathered the last of my things.

"Are you well, Dr Desai?"

I opened the door and flinched at the brighter light outside. The attendant was cute and pale, a few years younger than me. His smile was perfect, reserved, professional.

"Well as can be. How do you *smile* after that?"

Now he grinned. There was a certain wryness in the corners that might have been authentic. "I'm accustomed."

Large windows ran down the length of the jumpship corridor, and outside was snow. Not just snow: blizzard. Whiteness in drifts and great flakes. I'd seen snow before, on trips to the Antarctic Settlements, but even the polar storms were nothing like what fell outside. Bodies in thick snowsuits strolled among squat gray buildings. I stopped and stared.

"Welcome to Ganesha," said the attendant.

He led me through white corridors to the arrival gate, where an elegant purple banner bore Trung's name and the dates of the Summer Lectures. There was a delegation waiting at the gate: Trung in a crisp suit, instantly recognizable; a gray-haired couple who were almost certainly the Pritzhak-Khubchanis, Ganesha's Founders; a bald young woman in form-fitting black. Before anyone else could speak, Trung stepped forward, inclined his head, and extended his hand.

"Dr Desai," he said. "I am honored and entranced."

I shook his hand, still a bit dazed and uncomprehending. The grueling trip, the ice world, this sweaty-palmed, blue-eyed celebrity: it was all accumulating so quickly that none of it seemed very incredible at all. The Pritzhak-Khubchanis introduced themselves in turn, but their words, mild and plain, vanished from memory as soon as they registered. The pair reminded me of no one more than my own grandparents; they finished one another's sentences, seemed nearly to speak in tandem. I looked to the woman in black expecting a final introduction, but she stared straight ahead with her hands clasped behind her back. At first I thought she stood with her eyes closed, but now that I

saw her more closely I understood: her eyes were as black as her skin and bodysuit. Neither Trung nor the Pritzhak-Khubchanis acknowledged the woman, and my curiosity quickly overcame my reserve.

"I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name."

Marius Pritzhak misunderstood the question. "She'll take you to your suite, yes. I know you're tired, my dear. Please have a tuck in before the reception tonight." As the woman in black took my bags, I thought I saw a thin smile and a wink, some brief inscrutable confidence between us.

Tonight. Now that I thought about it, I didn't know the time of day, or even how long a day ran on this planet. That, I think, is what most confirmed for me the reality of travel, that weird fact of elsewhere.

I didn't know how long a night could last.

.....
"Yama is a puzzle. No doubt about it." My palms left their moist prints on the lectern; I wrung my hands. I had always been easy before crowds, *known* for my easiness, but this was new and awful. I wanted to look at Trung – to prove to myself that I could, to show myself that he was only a man at a podium – and I wanted never to see him again. Perhaps I sounded self-assured, but it felt like I was sweating out of my bones.

"Indeed, Dr Trung is right to raise the question of names. We have a dead, blasted world that we call 'Yama' and a living, unlikely people for whom we use the same name. They are the only *other* beings we've yet encountered in our multiverse, and we found them not on an alternate Earth but among the detritus of one. To say the word 'Yama' is to speak of death and impossible life; the name itself is puzzle and paradox."

Was I babbling? I had no idea. I couldn't tell whether or not the Ganeshans were engaged. The Pritzhak-Khubchanis smiled in their kind, vacant way, but that told me nothing: only that I'd not yet put them to sleep. I snuck a quick peripheral glance at Trung. He watched me with clasped hands and an expression of polite interest.

"It is Dr Trung's contention that the Yama are non-native to their present habitat. His argument is essentially environmental: because they are capable of digesting only a small percentage of the minerals available to them, the planet Yama is in his view unlikely to have fostered the species through the course of its development. I will demonstrate first that this argument is unpersuasive, and second that Dr Trung's thesis fails to account for several nesting behaviors of the Yama. Finally, I will prove that the Yama are their universe's Earthborn, and therefore the first natives of an alternate Earth with whom we have made contact."

As I spoke, I remembered the rightness of my case, the importance. I was terrified, baring myself to be judged against him, but I think I stood a little straighter and spoke with more vigor. I pressed a button on my lectern and projected my first slide; Trung could open with all the jokes and smiles he liked, but I'd show the Ganeshans data.

"Dr Trung's analysis of Yama's mineral environment suffers from two important mistakes. Most crucially, his scan is a general one; he does not include artificial caches in his –"

"I'm sorry," Trung interjected, resting his chin in his palm and his elbow on the podium. "I don't mean to be rude, but did you say *artificial caches*, or did I mishear?"

The audience whispered among themselves, apparently as jarred by the interruption as I was. "You heard correctly," I said. Now I felt hot with anger – that he spoke to me so nonchalantly, that he knocked me out of my stride, that he imposed himself whenever he liked. I wanted to say something cutting and awful, call him out while I had the Ganeshans' sympathies. Instead, I listened as he spoke again.

"I only ask," said Trung, now tapping the podium, "because in a year of study I've encountered no evidence whatsoever of artificial caches. No Yama building or accessing caches, no dense concentrations of iron. Nothing. Can you supply us with any such evidence, Dr Desai?"

Now I knew why he'd interrupted, what he was working toward. Behind the lectern, I clenched my fists until the nails cut my palms. "The Yama alluded to the caches in my communications with them," I said slowly, holding his gaze.

"Communications. I see." He looked down at his podium and shook his head, then pointed his bright eyes back at mine. "Unfortunately, I've had no communications of my own with the Yama. Nor has anyone else, to the best of my knowledge. I understand your, ah, congress with the tribe is *psychic* in nature, is that correct?"

"I don't want to define alien behavior in human terms." There were scattered chuckles from the crowd, but I was shaking and Trung knew it. My fists rattled on the lectern. Now Trung grinned as widely as I'd yet seen.

"*Touché*. Still, I wonder how to describe your...palavers. I have here –" He shuffled through papers, probably for dramatic effect. "I have here an article that Dr Desai wrote recently for *The Often Happy Review*. One passage in particular strikes me as both instructive and very puzzling; it sheds some light, I think, on Dr Desai's unorthodox (and independently unreproduced) communications as well as her particular mental state. I quote:

Immersion is a surreal and often terrifying experience, and it is sometimes difficult to persuade myself that I am not alone. The barrier between skin and vacuum is only a sheer film of nanites; I feel nothing, hear nothing. Even the eye is disappointed: the Yama are not outwardly colorful, but resemble great gray trilobites, or thick squids built of blasted rock. They do not flit and fight, but drift and slowly feed. Sometimes my enthusiasm for these miracles is marred by a kind of mad doubt that they live at all: have we, in our loneliness, mistaken a cloud of debris for something incredible?

But then I am moved. It feels like the migration of a dead soul, like a leaving and a coming home... I enter the Yama and I feel the Yama; I remember the nurturing of newborn and the gathering of iron, the slow and sad negotiation of generation-pacts. This communion, this entanglement, is both beautiful and wrenching: beautiful because my soul limns the vast drifting intelligences of an impossible world, and wrenching because I must leave and live alone.

"Unquote," Trung murmured.

I listened to my words in his mouth and it galled. The audacity of his theft – that theft among the others – tore and scraped and galled, and I must have cried out in frustration. Trung bit his lip and delivered his *coup de grace*.

"These just don't sound like the words of a scholar." He turned to me, frowning, for all the world like a man making an apology. "I fear Dr Desai is hearing voices in the dark."

.....
Barefoot and affable, Trung offered me a glass of champagne.

"The Ganeshans," he said, "are dedicated partiers." He'd obviously waited for me here at the door. I was still tired and jump-lagged and didn't know how to respond. The Reception Hall was just as redolent of brilliant excess as the rest of the colony. I would've been speechless even without his attentions.

I took the champagne and smiled.

The Hall was a pentagonal dome, wood-paneled with enormous windows overhead. The entire marble floor was a sort of shallow pool; in the center of the room, an ornate silver fountain sprayed fresh water high into the air. Once the spray reached its zenith, it paused – rather, it fell very, very slowly, as if in low gravity. Outside, snow spun in fierce whorls.

"Isn't it lovely?" said Trung. "You'll have to hear Marius explain the, ah, foot-pool here." He imitated Pritzhak's soft, halting voice: "*It is, my dear, a public space. We are all mixing our roots.*" He laughed and kicked the water. "It is good fun, I suppose."

Good fun. I felt hot and uneasy; it was a relief to step out of my shoes and into the water. I took a sip of champagne.

"The Pritzhak-Khubchanis seem very kind."

"Gods yes, it's intolerable. Last week they invited me to dinner in their personal suite. Now, I was expecting unreasonable opulence: diamond chandeliers, filet mignon on the bare backs of prostrate servants, all that. What do I find instead? Marius and Parvati, three plates of spaghetti, and a modest studio apartment. I keep hoping I'll turn a corner and find the old farts torturing a puppy, or...skipping about on a naked mushroom bender. Otherwise I'll have to go on feeling like a ne'er-do-well grandson every time I talk to them."

I laughed and sipped the champagne again.

"Now," said Trung, pointing to a woman who made her way toward us, "here is a properly debauched aristo." The stranger strode forward and took my free hand, shaking it firmly.

"Aishwarya," she said. The only person all day who'd used my first name. "Honored and entranced. My name is Yuen Xi."

"Well met." I released her hand and she drifted backward, toward Trung. "Our Humanities building at Often Happy is named for a Yuen Xi," I said. "I wonder if you're related."

"Oh yes." She linked arms with Trung. "Absolutely. It's named for me." She spoke in the same lilting, grinning way as Simon – impossible to tell whether she joked or not.

"Yuen is a staunch Desai partisan," added Trung. "If she tells me true, she's one of your most generous contributors."

"Oh?" I began to flush.

"Simon is a wretched liar. I serve on the advisory councils of several organizations that fund your research. No more or less. That said, I'm an enormous admirer of your work."

"Thank you," I said. I didn't feel thankful. I felt embarrassed and empty and out of my depth. These people dripped conversation, and I was all monosyllables and awkward smiles.

Yuen Xi nodded, as if in agreement. "You're a very creative thinker, Aishwarya, and that's a fact that recommends you. If the Yama are truly Earthborn, as you say...well, my hope is that your work may eventually help us find *ourselves*."

Trung laughed. "You mean an inhabited Earth. With another me and another Yuen Xi and another Dr Desai."

She pretended to pout. "I do."

"Not happening, my friend. It's basic deep-q: an Earth so similar to ours is too likely. We can only jump into an improbable universe. Entire deeps department at São Paulo'll tell you that, and they *never* agree."

Yuen turned to me. "See? Some scholars lack imagination."

I wanted to excuse myself and walk away, but my legs felt heavy and bloodless. Suddenly I was light-headed; Yuen and Simon sounded as if they spoke through water, and I drifted in and out of their argument.

"Clusters of probability –"

"Innovate, Simon –"

"Like a catapult –"

"You're talking about determinism –"

"Up and out but never nearby –"

My heart beat hard, but in half-time, like the bass cadence of some ominous march. Now I wanted badly to open my mouth, to ask for help, but could not. The sensation of heavy bloodlessness crept up my chest and neck. My gaze settled on a formation of water, falling ever so slowly to the pool below, and I couldn't look away.

How much time passed? I don't know. Did I pass out? I don't know. Yuen Xi was gone and my feet soaked the carpet. Trung's hand was on my waist. "Strong shit," he murmured in my ear. "These Ganeshans are dedicated partiers."

How much time passed? I was naked, with nothing at all to protect me from the vacuum. Cold and bloodless and dead, ice tile against my back. Forces heaved and shivered inside me. I was falling, or I'd fallen, and I couldn't breathe. My heart beat slow, its own dead rhythm.

I hate it, I thought quietly. I'm cold.

And his blue eyes glowed.

I slept after the debate, though it wasn't yet night. When I woke, the light in my suite was dim and it was dark outside the porthole. After staring at the ceiling for some time, I sat up and pressed my hand against the window. I felt a very faint chill, and that was all.

When I'm weightless, out in the waste and nothing of Yama, I want to feel some chill or warmth. I want to feel the nanite film, a crawl of warm machines across my skin. It's too unsettling, too *wrong* to have no stimulus at all, to drift and watch until your soul moves.

I got out of bed and the suite lights brightened. My eyes still stung. I took a long shower and watched myself in the mirror until it was completely fogged over. I didn't want to be here, but neither did I want to jump back home in the morning. *Shit*, I thought. *Shit*.

Eventually the hot water dwindled. I turned off the shower, dried, and stepped out of the bathroom. Then my eye fell on a slip of paper beneath the suite's front door.

I thought you won. P.K.

Parvati Khubchani. My eyes watered. Her four words were kinder than any I'd heard all day.

I fished around in the pockets of dirty clothes for my wi-mo and logged on to the colony wireless, thinking I'd thank Parvati.

But the wi-mo glowed red: no connection.

No connection. It felt like a punchline without a joke. I made a cup of tea and decided to write a letter: something longer than the two words I would've sent over wireless. I sat cross-legged in bed and composed first lines: *Your kindness is. Thank you for. I am deeply moved. I am indebted.* First lines are always the hardest. Even when you decide on one, you change it a dozen times before you're done. I changed it again –

And the world shook.

There was a low, enormous snap: like the bass string spine of the world plucked too hard. Lights cut off and then returned, dimmer than before. Lamps tumbled from nightstands, books from shelves. I fell on my back, arms open wide, ready to embrace the ceiling.

And it was over. Afterward the compound creaked, sung a long eerie song of stressed metal. I wondered if I was going to die, and opened my wi-mo. Still no connection. Warily, I got up from the bed and walked to the window – really a large, person-sized porthole set into a wood-panel alcove. Outside was mostly accumulated snow, but if I climbed up into the alcove I could see a patch of gray sky. I leaned forward on my knees and the bruises there complained; the window barely, just *barely*, chilled my palm. Over the wall of snow, against gray clouds...

No. Not sky. That gray was too close for clouds, too rough. Something else, something new and enormous was outside. I turned around and slid out of the alcove. Stood dumb and still in the middle of my suite. *Think*, I thought, unable or unwilling to connect the dots, to sling that last neuron across the great cogitative divide.

Was it possible that...?

The front door rattled once and then opened. Not violently – covertly, as if someone had coaxed the lock with whispers and soft fingers. The door closed again, and that *someone* materialized in my suite, black-eyed, her lips pressed pale. She wore a white hardsuit now, and her face wasn't half so obscure as the last time I saw her.

"Are you crazy?" she demanded.

I am the light behind my eyes.

Again and again: that thought, a mantra. I was weightless, clenched tight. Anxious and angry and sick of the thought that bobbed constantly to the surface.

I am the light behind my eyes.

I drifted in space, hurt and confused, hurt in a way that I couldn't understand. I struggled through folds of black, wrenched apart the curtains of *here*, until all I felt was the agony of elsewhere, the long fall in every direction, the fall toward myself...

I woke up.

Now a different flavor of pain ran through me. Sore exhaustion, an ache in every joint. I was curled up naked on my couch, my head thick with hangover. Somewhere an alarm clock played ocean sounds. Gulls, the steady sigh of waves. I smelled coffee, heard someone breathe nearby. The realization shouldered its way slowly though my headache:

Oh. Not my couch.

Trung sat in a recliner on the opposite side of the room, watching me and sipping coffee from a wine glass. He'd pulled on a pair of loose silk pajama pants. It hurt to look at him, so I

shut my eyes and listened to the gulls on the alarm.

The couch, brown and rough corduroy, reminded me of the furniture in my grandparents' old house. I squeezed my eyelids tight, willed the headache away, and thought about my dream.

I am the light behind my eyes.

Falling in every direction, toward myself.

My clothes lay in a pile near Trung, halfway between the living area and kitchenette. The thought of moving closer to him made me want to throw up, but I couldn't lay there silent and exposed. I sat up. Stood. My stomach lurched, but I swallowed the bile and took unsteady steps past Trung, to my things. I pulled on my skirt.

"I'm not proud of this either, Aishwarya," he said, looking straight ahead. The coffee-stained wine glass at his lips.

Chemise. Shawl. I dressed quickly, mechanically. Shoes. *Put the socks in my purse...where's my purse?* Kitchen counter. I grabbed it, opened the door, nearly fell over.

Shit. Steady.

I wasn't sure where I was. Guest quarters, obviously, but I didn't know how this hallway related to any other, didn't know if my suite was around the next corner or down five flights of stairs. Again, I almost puked.

"Aishwarya?"

The woman locked a nearby door and approached me. Long black hair, unreadable eyes. Yuen Xi. *Staunch Desai partisan.* "Aishwarya," she said. "Oh."

I must have looked desperate. I must not have been unreadable. She came close, took me by the waist. Guided me away. It was familiar, that guidance. Fingers on my waist. It gave me a chill, and I resisted.

"It's nothing to be embarrassed about," she said.

"Ah," I said. "Okay."

Nothing to be embarrassed about.

.....
The woman in the hardsuit frowned.

"The other day you asked for my name," she said. She spoke with an accent, one I couldn't quite place. "I am Nwuli Thiong'o, Assistant Security Marshal for the colony. Now you need to answer me: are you crazy?"

"What?"

"Your rapport with the Yama. Is it genuine?"

A week ago I would have answered without qualification.

"I think so. Yes."

"I *hope* so," she said, and handed me the capsule. "Here, chew on this. Next question: did you do it? Deliberately?"

I knew what she meant. Or I could guess, anyway. But the reality was too enormous, too impossible, and I still hadn't processed it. "Do what?" I asked, staring at the capsule. Nwuli walked to the window and pointed outside.

"One of your Yama is out there in the snow. It seems to have appeared out of thin air. Did you...call it here?"

I chewed the capsule. It tasted bitter.

"No," I said. "Not deliberately."

My teeth tingled. Nwuli nodded.

"Do you feel anything right now? Any connection?"

None that I recognized. "No."

She sighed. "All right. The creature appears to be unconscious. Half of the colony is trapped underneath. The Founders, Dr

Trung, hundreds more. Wireless is down, but I'm operating under the assumption that we've got a lot of wounded bodies down there." Now my entire face and chest tingled. Nwuli met my eyes. "We've got to move it *now*."

"What do you want me to do?"

Nwuli looked me up and down. "Your film's active. Let's go outside. Maybe it'll help you to get closer. To touch it."

Nanite film. I didn't look or feel any different, but then, I wouldn't. I tried to remember if I'd ever dealt with an unconscious Yama before. Once I was part of a dirge for one of the dying, a battered and bloated thousand-year-old. But there had never been occasion to wake a Yama from the dark.

I felt like I had when I arrived on Ganesha. So many bizarre new things were accumulating that none struck me as very strange at all; I simply had a problem to solve. Should we shock it somehow? *Could* we shock it?

"Let's move," said Nwuli. She climbed into the porthole alcove and pressed her fingers against the window. The pane rippled and then melted. Snow spilled into the suite, but hissed and evaporated where it touched Nwuli's hardsuit. I walked up behind her and looked out the open window. The air alone should have frozen me where I stood.

Outside was the vast flank of the Yama.

In space they'd never seemed so staggeringly massive. But in Ganesha, with more familiar frames of reference, the size of the creature was awesome. Half of the colony sprawl and the entire western horizon was obscured by the Yama's ridged spine.

We clambered out the window. I felt graceless behind Nwuli; she moved with the poise of a dancer. Even her breathing was deliberate, each exhalation outsized, as if her mouth were right beside my ear. The nanites must have negotiated speech and noise: the howl of the wind should have been deafening.

Slowly, carefully, we climbed the makeshift bank. Snow no longer hissed against Nwuli's hardsuit, but our nanites manipulated the ice as necessary, freezing or melting to afford us better traction. My muscles burned.

And then we crested the bank. The Yama lay on its side, its jagged bulk twisted over Ganesha Colony. Its spines were bent, its tentacles twisted at ugly angles. The poor thing shuddered hugely, and the ground shook beneath us.

"Well," said Nwuli. "I think it's awake."

.....
Yuen Xi steered me into her suite and deposited me on the couch. Brown corduroy, like Trung's. I wanted to be alone but knew I couldn't make it to my own suite. Not by myself.

A muted documentary played on Yuen's wallscreen. She talked as she worked in the kitchenette. "No need to eat in the dining hall, is there? Plenty here." I heard a fridge open and close. "We're well-stocked. Coffee for you, I think."

Foxes. On the wall. Young foxes in the snow. Behind me, the morning whirl of machines. Drips and soft pops. There was unexpected comfort in those sounds, a mundane familiarity that I wanted to last forever. I could watch foxes, and listen to Yuen's socks pad across linoleum...

She sat beside me and put a warm, thick mug in my hands.

"Gods know you're not the first. Neither was I."

I nodded, raised the mug to my lips.

"And you're *young*. Now's the time, right?"

"Can we talk about something else?" I asked quietly. My mouth felt dry and gummy. I sounded like my tongue was half-anesthetized. The coffee burned some feeling into my gums, for which I was thankful.

An appliance beeped and Yuen stood up to deal with it. "I'm sorry," she said. "Of course. Naturally I'll keep quiet, so you needn't worry. Don't want these too hot..." She returned with a plate full of sugar pastries. I waved no-thank-you and she put the plate down on the coffee table.

"Could you turn up the volume?" I asked. The screen responded automatically. A male voice spoke indistinctly about holes and winter. Yuen nibbled at pastries, and we watched the screen in silence for some time.

When she spoke again, her tone was more somber. "I hope," she said, "when we find ourselves, it's you they send to say hello. You and not him."

Staunch Desai partisan, I thought. I looked at her.

"He's not good with others," she continued. I started to wonder if she was drunk. "He doesn't get what's possible. But you really know how to *be* someone else, right?"

I was simultaneously touched and annoyed. The last thing I wanted right then was Yuen Xi's pop psychology. Still, she was helping me, caring for me. A new wave of dizziness washed over, and with it the first germ of an ache behind my eyelids.

I am the light behind. Yes.

I turned to Yuen Xi. Close up, you realized she was older than she first appeared. You saw the creases around her mouth, under her eyes. The needle-thin streaks of gray in her hair.

"You think we're going to meet ourselves someday?" I asked. I wasn't terribly interested in her answer, but I didn't want to hear myself think. Didn't want to dwell on Trung, and why she'd not have him greet her alien selves.

Yuen's eyes shone, warm with the particular zeal of the evangelist. "Oh yes. I know we will. I can't believe it's impossible. That's too depressing, isn't it? Too *lonely*. Imagine: out there somewhere, a panoply of you. So many people who know your mind and share your dreams exactly. Empathy incarnate. It would be a cruel multiverse that barred us forever from that kind of... perfect love. Cruel and lonely."

I wasn't so sure that another Aishwarya Desai would love or understand me so well. She likely would have lived a different life, after all. But I envied Yuen's conviction.

And it was a lovely thought. In a naïve, self-interested sort of way. Another Aishwarya, who would know what had hurt me and what not to say. Who would know to simply sit, to be near but not to touch me. There would be a special timbre to her sympathy, sorrowful but not sentimental. Gentle and a little cold. Untheatrical. She would not try to persuade me that she cared, or that she'd once suffered worse, or that she'd never felt so badly herself. She'd know not to try to make me happy, or tell me that everything was okay. We would be together, and she would speak quietly, and I would listen.

Lovely thought.

.....
We walked through flurry, across drifts of snow that hardened underfoot. I tried to rouse the *something* in me that shared in the Yama, the expansive grasping something that felt like a dead soul. No luck, and no connection: I was only myself.

In the back of my mind, I noted with cheerful academic detachment that Trung was probably right about the Yama after all. If they could jump from universe to universe, there was no reason to believe they were Earthborn.

Then again, I wasn't wrong about everything... I *had* summoned the Yama, hadn't I? Perhaps I wouldn't be able to send it away, but I'd known immediately that it was here for me. That night, that dream. The curtains of *here*, and falling toward myself. I wasn't crazy, at least; not crazy, no.

I'd done this, and I had to make it right.

Nwuli and I both jogged. The dampened sound, the lack of cold made me feel like a weird and insular world unto myself. *I did this*. It didn't signify. I was an out-of-place brush of human on a mural of snow and flesh. How in hell could I hammer the world? I ran –

And then –

And then –

It was like a leaving and a coming home. Like immersion in water, or some thicker liquid, so that any current, any motion is your motion and your current. I felt my legs fall out beneath me; I felt my vastness.

Oh, I thought.

We were in pain, but oh. We were vast, and not just vast but *possible*, possible in a way I understood more fully than ever before, possible in so many worlds, so many universes.

(A hard hand shook a shoulder somewhere.)

We shuddered. We spread our limbs and winced.

(Opened tiny eyes.)

"Are you connected?" came a voice, far away.

We shook snow off our flank and carefully lifted our head. The ground shook when we shook. We felt minds beneath us, many and tiny, minds like grains of sand. Familiar and damaged and dead minds, panicked and brilliant and quiet minds.

(Simon Trung.)

"Aishwarya, send it away!"

Familiar minds. Despair surged through me. Through both Aishwarya and the Yama, which didn't understand why we hurt, but knew that we did. He was so small and so awful. One or both of our stomachs wrenched. *I could stay here*, I thought. We were tired and in pain. We could settle here and sing these minds their dirges, sing and watch them wink out below.

Or we could go elsewhere.

We believed in elsewhere. We believed in being awake for the jump. We believed in applying human descriptors to alien behavior, and in going home, even when home was just *away*.

We were possible in so many worlds, and my soul limned the great gaping mouth of elsewhere. Perhaps my old body would move with the Yama, safe and still in its nanite film. Or my soul would simply leave its skin behind. Perhaps I would return to the woman in the snow, and we would tend to the wounded.

"Aishwarya," she said.

But I was gone.

Eric Gregory lives in the mountains of Virginia with his wife and too many books. His stories have recently appeared (or are forthcoming) in *Black Static*, *Strange Horizons*, and Apex Books' *The Blackness Within*. He has also written non-fiction for *Fantasy Magazine* and the *Internet Review of Science Fiction*. Visit him online at ericmg.com.

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"You absolutely cannot hope to find a better collection of razor-edged roses anywhere on the planet" Agony Column

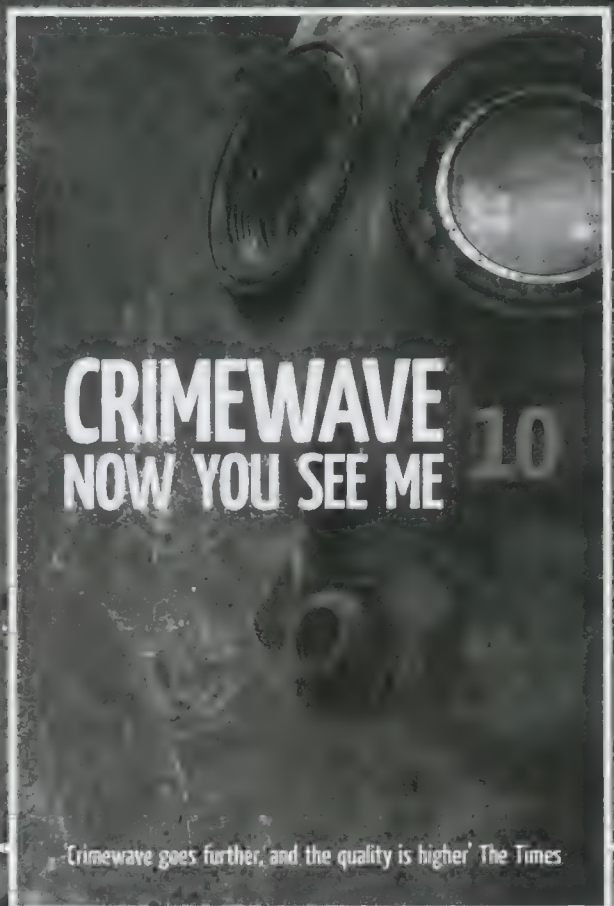
STILL AVAILABLE IN DELUXE PAPERBACK AND HARDBACK

Chris believed that Alison was the love of his life. He believed that Spike and Emma were his best friends. He trusted them. Turns out we all have our dark side...

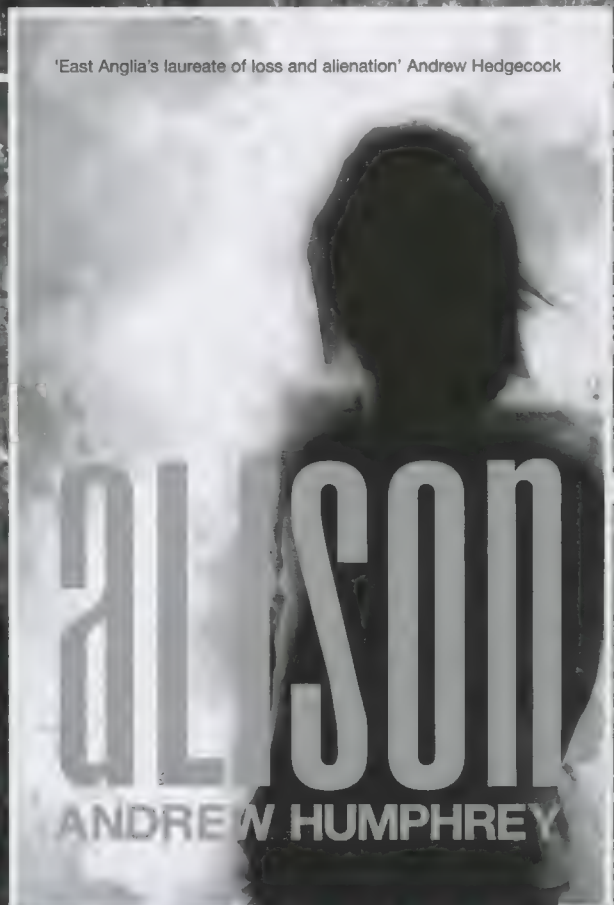
This first novel from successful, award-winning short-story writer Andrew Humphrey builds on his fascination with dark desires, creating a compelling mystery that holds the reader in its grip as the disparate threads of a man's life unravel amid revelations and recriminations.

cover art by David Gentry

"One of the best crime novels I have ever read...bleak, intense, moving, heartbreaking stuff" Gary McMahon



FROM THE PUBLISHER OF INTERZONE



SILENCE & ROSES by SUZANNE PALMER

illustrated by LeMat

Button-4-Circle-Peach was tending to the roses when word came: Thomas had fallen silent. "I will assist," he said. With efficiency and care he cleaned the dirt from his trowel, put it away, then rose to his feet and went to go find his charge.

Thomas was resting on the stone bench by the pond, as was his habit at this time of morning. Ducks milled about the white-haired man clamoring in disappointment, for he had stopped throwing crumbs of bread for them. The remainder of the loaf lay by his side, one hand perched lightly upon it. He had a far-away look set upon his face and did nothing. Button-4-Circle-Peach knelt beside the bench in the grass and clover. "Thomas," he said, as gently as he could, reaching out to touch the man's shoulder in sympathy. "We have been friends for a very many years. Will you talk to me, and recite to me some of your poetry? I have been working on a modest poem of my own and had greatly anticipated getting your impressions of it."

But Thomas would not answer. It was just as he had been told: silence had overtaken the man.

He picked up what was left of the bread and put it away in his compartment beside the trowel. The sun was bright above, nearly overhead now with no clouds to obscure it, but he checked his instruments as a precaution and was glad of it. "It's going to rain tomorrow so we should try to find time today to finish off this old loaf. The ducks will surely be grateful, and it would be for the best if you try to maintain your routines until this spell you have fallen under passes."

The silence stretched for several long minutes. Thomas was not going to be so easily roused from his lassitude; none of the others had been either. "You must be getting hungry," Button-4-Circle-Peach said at last. "Eating will help you get your strength back. This afternoon I could show you the new roses I have been cultivating, if you'd like. But first, I do think lunch is in order."

He stood carefully, brushing bits of grass from his legs with the tips of his fingers, careful not to scratch or dull his surface. "Let me help you up," he said, and bent down and picked up his charge, cradling him against his chest. The faint breeze that had kept him company while he had been tending the roses was picking up, and in consideration of his charge's comfort he raised his own body temperature to provide additional warmth.

The red wood-plank bridge that arched over the narrow end of the pond cast a glorious reflection across the water, broken only by the small ripples of waterbugs and the multitudes of amphibian eyes that regarded them with a wary and unblinking disinterest. On the far shore Button-4-Circle-Peach spied Thomas's friend Lorelei, assisted by Yellow-Square-Q-Forest, enjoying a favorite book beneath the shade of a tall maple. He waved to the pair, and Yellow-Square-Q-Forest waved back.

"Lorelei looks very nice today. That dress suits her, don't you think?" he commented to Thomas after they had passed.

Still, the man would not be drawn out. *I hope I haven't somehow offended him*, Button-4-Circle-Peach thought. *Could it be that I talk too much?* He recalled a conversation with Ecrú-8-Bee-Scooter, who had tried matching Paolo's silence with silence in return in hopes of drawing him out through boredom. It had not worked, or at least not yet, and Ecrú-8-Bee-Scooter was in no small amount of despair over it. So far, none of the caretakers had found an answer to the malady that was overtaking the residents one by one; Paolo had been the first, Thomas now the latest and the last.

Still, Button-4-Circle-Peach was determined not to let himself become so easily discouraged. Perhaps the secret was to talk so much that Thomas would speak just to get a word in. In either case, it was Button-4-Circle-Peach's opinion that the sociality of conversation, so enjoyed by the residents amongst themselves normally, could only be good for them. "It occurs to me, since it will rain tomorrow, that today may be a good day to share a picnic with Deirdre. She and you have been intimates for a long time and I imagine her company will cheer you. And yours her as well! Since we are already on our way to eat, why don't I invite her to join us?"

He was about to take another step when he spied something of concern. "My apologies," he said. "I need to address this immediately, if you do not mind." He set Thomas down very gently on a cushion of grass and club moss, and set his cane within reach on the ground beside him. Then he knelt down on the dirt of the path and lowered his head to the ground. Zooming in with his eyes for a closer look he studied the tiny tendril of vine creeping across the way that had caught his eye. A delicate thing, it would surely be crushed by feet less careful than his own. Gingerly he extended the smallest of his grasping fingers and worked it up from the soil, taking care not to snap any of the hair-fine roots, and then he laid it back down parallel to the edge of the path where it could flourish in safety.

"Grow along the path, not across it," he instructed the vine. Done, he brushed his hands together to shake loose any remaining dirt, and then turned back to Thomas pleased with himself for having caught the problem before harm was done. "That's better," he said. "With luck, it'll take my advice and stay to the side. Vines always do try to grow every which way when you aren't paying attention to them, though. It's their nature."

Lost in his thoughts, Thomas showed neither appreciation or disapproval. Button-4-Circle-Peach picked up the man again and cradled him in one arm. "I spoke with 2-16-Apple-Flower while I was assisting the vine and she expects that Deirdre would indeed enjoy a picnic with us. As she's already at the food replication facility, they will bring the repast and meet us at the gazebo in the small courtyard. The magnolias have finished blooming, but the irises are out at full strength and there are koi in the reflecting pool nearby." Since his charge did not express a



wish to do otherwise, he set off with him in that direction.

The flagstones of the small courtyard were laid in concentric circles around the gazebo in the center, luxurious mounds of Irish Moss creeping over their edges as if they were sinking in slow motion into an ocean of green. He walked the perimeter at a leisurely pace, pointing out the irises, daffodils, and the last few tulips, before helping Thomas to a seat at the table in the shelter of the ancient gazebo's roof. A silver bowl held fresh pears; he offered Thomas one, but the man had never been especially fond of pears so it was no great surprise when the gesture raised no sign of interest.

With a sigh, he bent his oversized frame into a seat beside the man and stretched out his legs beneath the table, colliding unexpectedly with something.

"Ow!" someone yelled, and his first thought was that the exclamation had come from Thomas. He stared at the man in equal parts alarm and excitement that he'd elicited even that brief response, but no, Thomas still sat impassive, disengaged from the world in the same manner as before. Button-4-Circle-Peach bent down – no easy feat, for the gazebo had not originally been designed with the size of the caretakers in mind – and peered beneath the table. Dark eyes, set in a filthy face smeared with pear juice, stared back at him from the shadows. It was a face with the still-unsettled features of someone intent on adulthood but not yet quite arrived, starkly incongruous in a place where everyone could, without fear of error, be considered elderly.

It was the face of a stranger.

"You aren't a resident," he said.

"You kicked me," the girl answered. "With your great big ugly robot feet."

"My apologies. I wasn't aware that you were there," Button-4-Circle-Peach replied.

"That's because I was hiding!"

"Why? And from whom?"

"From you. Because I'm eating your pears."

Button-4-Circle-Peach blinked at her a couple of times. "You aren't a resident," he said again. "Why are you here?"

"I was hungry, stupid."

The girl did look thin, at least in her face and around the eyes if not elsewhere. It occurred to him that, three decades since they had arrived here and the estate had been closed to the outside world, the novelty of a new face might be startling enough to rouse Thomas. "Why don't you remove yourself from under the table and sit with us?" he said. "My friend would surely enjoy some new company, and his friend Deirdre and her assistant should be arriving momentarily with lunch. I am certain we will have enough to share with you as well."

She peered at him, then nervously at Thomas's legs. "You won't hurt me, or throw me out?" she said.

"I'm a caretaker. It is against my nature to hurt things," he said. "The residents will have to discuss your presence here and decide if you can be allowed to stay, but none here will harm you. In the meantime, my friends are almost here – won't you join us?"

"If you promise it's not a trick on me."

"I promise."

"Okay." She slid herself back out from under the table as he straightened and sat up. Her fingers appeared on the far table edge, then the top of her head with a bewilderingly tangled knot

of dirty-blond hair upon it, then a frightened pair of blue eyes. Stopping there, the girl stared at him and Thomas. "He don't look so good," she said.

"Sadly, he has recently been suffering from a disorder of silence," Button-4-Circle-Peach said.

Her eyes grew wide. "He's not breathing!"

Button-4-Circle-Peach glanced at Thomas, and could not help but smile fondly at his friend. "I am sure he will resume breathing when he is feeling ready."

"No, you stupid robot. He's dead!" The girl stood up and backed away from the table until she bumped up against the railing of the gazebo. She was looking from him to Thomas and back again in some alarm.

"Does that matter? I'm not alive, yet I function."

"But you're a robot," she said. "That's different."

"From what?" he asked.

"From live things. Oh!" She stamped her foot in frustration. "I'm all starved, and here I am arguing with you with a dead man sitting right there at the table! No wonder everyone is afraid of this place!"

The girl was making no sense at all and was clearly distraught; Button-4-Circle-Peach considered trying to take her hand and comfort her, but decided against it. "2-16-Apple-Flower will be arriving in a moment with Deirdre and our picnic lunch," he said instead. "I do not understand your agitation; I have always found Thomas to be pleasant company and I am certain he will not object to sharing lunch with you."

"He's dead! How can he say anything about it? Oh, this is a bad crazy devil place after all!" And she burst into tears.

"Please," he said, "no one here is hurting you. It is just a matter of the silence – it affects the residents sometimes, but we are caring well for them and they will surely self-repair very soon. Look, here comes 2-16-Apple-Flower and Deirdre with our lunch even now!"

"God overlook me," the girl swore, and her face went a very colorless shade and she put a hand to her mouth. Then she turned and vomited over the gazebo rail into the pansies, climbed hastily and gracelessly over, and ran away.

.....
Later, after Button-4-Circle-Peach had tucked Thomas into his bed, read to him from his favorite book of verse, and slipped in a small piece of his own to no reaction (at this, he felt disappointed and then embarrassed for the selfish act at a time when his concern should be solely on the well-being of his charge) he turned on his night eyes and went to go find the girl.

The mystery of how she had gotten into the garden in the first place was easily and more quickly solved; a tree had grown up against the stone wall that enclosed the garden and estate, and no one had taken the time to keep its branches pruned away. By no one, Button-4-Circle-Peach knew he really meant *someone*, but Ecu-8-Bee-Scooter had been occupied with Paolo's care for nearly a year now. The girl must have climbed over the wall unarmed; had she been bearing weapons, even rudimentary ones, the wall defenses would have kept her away. He considered switching to his pruning hands and solving the problem of the tree right then and there, but decided against it; there was no reason it could not wait until morning and he had other, more pressing matters to attend to. He made a note of the problem

and continued his survey.

While the tree afforded a way in for someone determined to come over the wall, it did not provide a way back out. Once he had walked the perimeter of the entire wall and found no other incursions upon it, he was certain the girl must still remain confined within. Circling back to the gazebo, he discovered that the silver bowl was now empty of pears. "Nameless girl!" he called, keeping his voice low so as not to disturb the sleeping residents. "Nameless girl, won't you please come out?"

There was no answer. He climbed up the stone steps to the observation tower, looked out over the sea that bordered one edge of the estate. The drop, onto rocks and pounding surf, would have been catastrophically damaging had someone fallen that way, so he was relieved to see no signs of the girl below. Then he turned and looked out over the estate house and the gardens, the duck pond and the reflecting pool, the gazebo and fountain, and his precious rose-beds, and switched his sight to infrared. He should have thought of it sooner, but lately the residents had become hard to find that way. A bright glow among the rhododendrons on the far side of the duck pond provided the answer he was seeking.

Button-4-Circle-Peach left the tower and walked toward the pond, over the bridge, and stopped a few feet away from the rhododendron bed. "Nameless girl," he called out again. "Please come out."

A moment's silence, then from within the darkness of the foliage: "I got a name. Just because I didn't tell it to you don't mean I don't got one."

"My apologies," he said.

He sat down in the grass and took several covered bowls out of his compartments. "I saved you some rice, chicken, and fresh snow peas from tonight's dinner," he said. "You did mention you were hungry, and the food would have just gone to waste otherwise." He set the bowls down on the grass in front of the bushes, and then waited.

She crawled out from beneath the rhododendrons and sat back on her heels, giving him a suspicious glare before she picked up the first of the bowls and pried the lid off. "Utensils," he said, and held out a fork and spoon. She took them and stuffed several large mouthfuls into her face before she raised her eyes to look at him.

"You got a name?" she asked.

"Button-4-Circle-Peach."

She laughed, a bit of rice stuck to her chin. "That's a dumb name, robot. Too long!"

"I like it," he answered. "I chose it myself."

The girl snorted. "It's too long." She pulled the top off the chicken bowl and began picking out pieces with her fingers and stuffing them into her mouth.

Button-4-Circle-Peach reached into his compartment and pulled out a book. "Would you like me to read to you while you eat? Thomas always enjoyed it when I did so."

Leaning forward, the girl stared at him, mouth open and full of half-masticated chicken. "Is that a real book?"

"It is. We have a modest physical library here at the estate, but we also have a comprehensive electronic library of both fiction and non-fiction texts," he said. "Do you have a favorite?"

"I never seen a book," she said. "I don't know of anybody who

can read any more, except maybe Grampa could I think. He died a few years back. I was twelve, or near about. We buried him proper."

Button-4-Circle-Peach was shocked and dismayed at this revelation. "You buried your own grandfather?"

"Yeah – that's what you're supposed to do!"

He thought about this for a long time. "Is being in the ground somehow necessary to trigger the self-repair process? I don't believe we've tried that. It does seem a terribly inconsiderate thing to do to someone."

"Yeah? What about everyone else? That lady the other robot brought to your little picnic, she'd been dead a long time. You know how I know? Because there were bits *falling off her*. You know how gross that is?" She stopped eating and looked down at the chicken in the bowl, and hastily pulled the lid back over it and swallowed a couple of times. "Look, can we stop talking about this? Just thinking about it makes me feel like being sick again."

They stared at each other for long minutes, then she sighed, picked up the bowl, and resumed eating. "I was Grampa's favorite. We used to talk and he'd tell me stories," she said. "About this place an' your people, and when you all first came back down out of the stars to live here, after the wars finally settled and Grampa wasn't even old enough for a gun of his own yet. He told me everyone was terrible afraid of you, said you were all devils and no one ever would come near here no matter what, in case if they did and the God War started again and everyone got killed."

"No one has come here before you," Button-4-Circle-Peach said. "That much is true. But we had nothing to do with the wars; I myself had not even been initialized back then."

"Nothing to do with it, maybe. But you weren't here helping either, were you? Grampa said your people were cowards who had all the money and got away up there to the stars before things got bad and left everybody else behind to fall into shame and die. With all those books you got here, seems to me you should understand what dying means."

"According to the majority of the poetry I've read, death appears to be a self-inflicted but temporary emotional state brought about by the unexpected failure of the function 'Love,'" he said. "I don't understand how that is applicable to the self-repair delay that the residents seem to be experiencing."

She waved a fork in the air, half a snow pea skewered on the end. "Poetry," she said, making a face, "don't mean nothing about nothing. Don't you got other books? Books about real life and real people? Or doctoring books, even better?"

"The doctor has a comprehensive digital library of medical texts."

The girl sat up straight at this. "You got a doctor here?"

"Yes. Unfortunately, she is also silent and so has not been able to advise us to the extent we'd wish."

She let out her breath with a sound that was half sigh, half grumble. "Dead too you're saying, except you don't get it. All her books – what do *they* tell you about dying and being dead?"

"I don't know," he said. "It's never occurred to any of us to read them."

"Maybe you should."

He downloaded, processed, cross-referenced, integrated. The clouds in the night sky slowly slid away, leaving the waxing

moon free to bathe them in its soft, blue-white light. The girl finished eating, wiping the insides of the bowls with her fingers to get the last, littlest crumbs, then neatly stacked bowls and lids in a row in front of him. Then she stretched out on the grass, one hand across her full belly, limbs glowing like ghosts in the moonlight, and watched him.

"Oh," he said at long last.

"You robots really are stupid," the girl said. "But the food was good and I'm thankful for it. Now go away so I can sleep." And she crawled back under the rhododendrons and out of sight.

Just before dawn Button-4-Circle-Peach left his small personal cubby. He went to Thomas's room and sat beside his friend, watching him lie there for a very long time, until the sun was fully up and shining in the window on the blankets, on the man's folded hands, and on his still, stone face.

He knew he should be helping his friend with his morning routines; that was, after all, what a caretaker *did*. He should help him wash and dress, escort him down to breakfast, then outside for some sun before the rain came. He should talk to him, let him know he would always be cared for and welcomed back when he chose to return to daily life. If not for the girl, that would be what he would be doing now, tomorrow, and the day after, and if the girl were correct every day until nothing remained of the man, and all of it to no purpose or good whatsoever. In short, Button-4-Circle-Peach was, for the first time he could ever recall, both uncertain and unhappy.

"I do not know what I am meant to do," he told his friend. "The village girl and the doctor's books would have me believe it is all in vain, but can helpfulness and the honest desire to serve ever be a wasted effort? I searched the library all night, all manner of books, trying to understand this. Some books speak of eternal life, or an after-life – the matter lies in the heart of the wars that drove you from this world in the first place, when you were all so much younger – but if you do not have a self-repair function, how can that be anything but a bald lie? Or do I not comprehend the authors' meaning? Am I endangering you by not knowing? I read about reincarnation and resurrection, about saints and messiahs and something suspiciously irrational called zombies, and none of these seem logical or desirable for the subject even if they were true, which I doubt. Yet there must be some truth in there with the lies, but I cannot tell which is which. Thomas, I confess; I do not know any more what I am meant to do, what meaning I have if none of the residents have need of my care any more."

The man, as he had come to expect (though he fervently wished otherwise), did not answer. In the end, he brushed the man's teeth and neatly combed his hair before leaving him lying peacefully in his bed. He walked out into the morning air and sat upon the granite steps outside the estate trying to convince himself that he should go back inside and resume his proper duties as he had always understood them, and ignore the conflict in his head.

"Button-4-Circle-Peach," Yellow-Square-Q-Forest said, coming down the stairs behind him with Lorelei wearing a brightly-bowed spring hat and wrapped in a freshly laundered blanket. "You seem not to be yourself this morning. Has something further transpired with Thomas?"

Not sure how to articulate his thoughts and in no way ready to admit to his current dereliction of duty, he responded with only, "It has been difficult, thus far."

"I assure you the burden of caring for a silent resident grows lighter with each passing day, until you hardly remember that they have changed," Yellow-Square-Q-Forest answered. "Oh, how surprised I will be when Lorelei speaks again, I have grown so used to her this way!"

"But what if she never does speak again?" he said.

"Of course she will. Why wouldn't she?"

In answer, Button-4-Circle-Peach sent Yellow-Square-Q-Forest reference links to the medical library, then as the other caretaker stood there processing he got up from the steps and walked away into the garden to think on it further himself, in the hope that solitude would reduce the noise in his head to something more singular and comprehensible.

After some time, as the first few drops of rain began to splatter, with a gentle *ting ting*, against his face, he found that he had come to stand before his roses. His thoughts cleared. Kneeling down where he had left off the previous day, he took out his trowel and renewed the task of disengaging the weeds that were always springing up. *Everything should be this simple and straightforward*, he thought, and decided that he would just go forward from that moment as if everything was, because surely that was how it was intended to be.

He was in the last bed, just beginning the task of gently trimming back the *Rosa Zepherine Drouhin* from where it had wrapped itself in tight ribbons of green and cerise around its column like some great snake determined to suffocate and devour it whole, when he realized that Yellow-Square-Q-Forest stood beside him. "There is a problem," the caretaker said.

"Yes," he answered. That was eminently obvious, if Yellow-Square-Q-Forest had read the medical texts... But his fellow caretaker's next words took him by surprise.

"Ecrú-8-Bee-Scooter has taken Paolo to the observation tower and jumped into the sea."

"What? Why?"

"I do not know, except that some minutes earlier I encountered him in food replication and shared with him the same links you provided to me. When I saw him climbing the steps to the tower I asked him what he was doing, but he did not answer. He asked Paolo if he had any objection to make about his intended course of action, and when the man did not voice one, he jumped."

"Oh no!" Button-4-Circle-Peach said. "How badly damaged were they?"

Yellow-Square-Q-Forest blinked twice at him. "Paolo is lost to the depths. Ecrú-8-Bee-Scooter was smashed, and submerged, and tossed repeatedly against the rocks. I do not believe his self-repair functions will be sufficient to the task of returning him to us, even if all the pieces of him could be gathered together again."

"This is terrible! Surely our dear residents, whatever their condition, deserve better of us than this!"

"Do you think it still matters?" Yellow-Square-Q-Forest said, and after a moment Button-4-Circle-Peach realized it was not meant rhetorically; the other sincerely wanted to hear his thoughts on it.

"I do not know," he answered. He turned back to his roses. "I

am sorry."

Yellow-Square-Q-Forest stood there for a while longer, as if to indicate that more of an answer was owed. When it was clearly not forthcoming, he walked away with no further word.

He finished with the *Zephyrine Drouhin* and moved down to the freestanding *Madame Isaac Pereire* beside it. The rain was falling steadily now, streams of water running down his face, and he clicked over a second protective set of eye lenses to keep his vision clear. The day passed as he sat and worked among his roses in silence.

At last dusk fell, and he put away his trowel and headed back through the garden towards the estate house, thinking it was time to find Thomas and bring him to dinner. He stopped halfway across the bridge when it struck him that Thomas had no need of dinner, and no need of him to take him there. He stood there paralyzed in the rain and gray, with no purpose and no destination to propel him forward.

Movement caught his attention. By the tall maple, Yellow-Square-Q-Forest had put on digging hands and was making a very large pit. A bundle lay on the ground beside him, a familiar bowed hat, sodden with rainwater and mud, just visible from beneath the folds. He crossed to the shore. "Yellow-Square-Q-Forest, what are you doing?" he asked.

"I am burying Lorelei, as that seems to be the correct final procedure," the caretaker answered. "I am making the pit large enough so that I can fit in there too; it is my intention to participate in this 'death' process with my friend."

"That makes no sense!" Button-4-Circle-Peach exclaimed.

The other caretaker nodded. "You are right, of course – I cannot finish the task of burying myself, because I will be buried. I must presume upon you to do so for me, and perhaps plant new grass on this sore spot I will have made in the lawn."

"Why don't you take Lorelei back to her bed and we can discuss this with the other caretakers in the morning?" he said. "Surely we can find a more logical way to deal with this."

"I apologize, but I am determined and do not wish to change my course," Yellow-Square-Q-Forest said. "Besides, I cannot return Lorelei to her room, as 256-256-Avocado-Spoon and Periwinkle-Y-512-Mountain have lit that wing of the estate on fire."

Button-4-Circle-Peach spun around and could see the smoke just now rising above the crenellated roof-line. Without another word he ran.

He came in through the front door, his feet slick on the wet granite entry, and made his way to the south wing faster than he ever thought himself capable, down hallways designed for the residents' smaller heights and strides. The smoke was so dense he had to push his air filters to maximum to keep his systems from becoming clogged, and even with his spare protective lenses down over his eyes vision was difficult and frustrating. He found 2-16-Apple-Flower first, lying prone upon the floor, self-deactivated. Of Deirdre there was no immediate sign.

Forcing himself to move on, he turned the corner into the grand sitting room, only to see rugs and furniture in a pyre in the center of the room and an unknown number of residents in disarray deep within the conflagration, while in and around the fire some caretakers lay inert while others grabbed anything and everything within reach and threw it onto the bonfire. Even as he entered, Coffee-Toast-8-Toad threw himself atop the fire,

and 32-Orange-Bird-Lake tossed a chess board after him.

"Stop!" Button-4-Circle-Peach yelled. "This reaction is inappropriate!"

256-256-Avocado-Spoon reached out one hand and took a lone volume from the bookshelves and added it to the fire. "It all needs to be destroyed," he said. "The residents have taken our entire purpose of being, everything we are and they were, and turned it into a mockery." He reached for another volume.

"Please, do not destroy the books."

256-256-Avocado-Spoon hesitated. "Why? What good is any of it any more, with no people for it or us to serve?"

"Our residents are not the only people."

"What, do you mean the people outside the walls? People who live in ignorance and superstition and filth, scratching in the dirt, people who nearly destroyed their entire species arguing over differences in philosophy? What would they do with any of this, other than burn this place to the ground themselves, and each of your precious books with it?"

"Perhaps so," Button-4-Circle-Peach said. "But perhaps not, or not always so."

"Or do you mean the people out in the stars who have turned their back on this place, this planet, disinherited themselves of both its past and future? They do not care! You remember how our people were laughed at for wanting to return to spend their days here. Neither would those people have any use for this place, except as they would for dust upon a path they have already walked and will not walk again." He hefted the book.

"Then, will you spare the books for my sake?"

"Why? What do you need of them for yourself?"

"Because I do not know who I am without this place."

"We are nothing, that is the answer to that," 256-256-Avocado-Spoon said. His fingers clicked open and the book fell to the floor, just beyond the spitting and hissing of the fire. "When you realize the truth, you will have to finish this work on your own." As if a switch had been flung, the caretaker's eyes went dim and he toppled backwards into the raging fire.

Button-4-Circle-Peach could not catch him in time. The fire roared up around the newly fallen caretaker, licking at the oak and plaster ceiling, not yet catching. He picked up the book and held it close, the cover hot to the touch and blackened but the pages undamaged. Around him the few remaining caretakers turned themselves off one by one until he was alone. He activated the room's emergency protocols and stood there as water coursed down upon him just as the rain had earlier, until there was only smoke and ruin and ash and a terrible mangle of bodies both flesh and metal upon the marble floor.

He went out into the night, found that Yellow-Square-Q-Forest had finished her task to the extent she was able, and he picked up the digging hands from where she had left them and straightened out the ground above them. A grim accounting followed: of the twenty-six residents, eight had been buried, six of them both by and with their caretakers. One had been thrown into the ocean. Eleven had been burnt upon the pyre in the living room. Six, including Thomas, remained in their beds, and who could say that they were any more or any less at peace than the rest? Other than himself, only three caretakers remained active, and none were communicating anything beyond their intention to self-deactivate in the morning.

Everything had been fine until yesterday. If only he could go back and erase that day entirely, as if none of this had ever happened.

Why can't I? he thought, and the block slipped easily into place like shutters pulled tight across a window.

Thomas's room, in the east wing, smelled strangely of smoke but otherwise seemed to be in order. He opened the window a fraction to allow fresh air to circulate, combed the man's hair again, and tucked the blankets up further beneath his chin.

"It is much too early yet for breakfast," he told the man. "I will return and wake you later, and then after you've eaten we can finish our task of feeding the ducks."

Button-4-Circle-Peach closed the door behind him as he left, and, for reasons he could not quite pinpoint, locked it. Leaving the estate house, he walked out into the garden. He would tend to his roses, and then he would read to Thomas – Keats today, he decided – as the man enjoyed his toast and morning coffee.

The sky was just beginning to lighten, smoke particles again detectable in the air out in the distant garden. He considered that he might want to track down the source, but the idea made him uneasy so he set that notion firmly aside. Checking the tea roses first, he found and removed a few stray weeds that had taken opportunistic advantage of the previous day's rain to pop up through the thick cedar mulch. The mulch was thinning here, an intolerable oversight on his own part. He determined to fix it immediately. He had been looking forward to showing Thomas the roses, but then –

No. There must have been some reason he had not already done so. If Thomas could not come to see the roses, he would bring them to him. After thorough study of the blooms on the bush he picked the most perfect of them, a bright yellow double blossom with a faint pink at the edges, much like the sky to the east was becoming. Using his fine cutters he lightly nipped it off with enough stem for a vase. On further consideration, he tapped off the thorns; it would be to his shame if Thomas hurt himself on his simple gift. He would put it in water, and then get the bark mulch and the grass seed out of storage, and see what could be put in order next.

Why the grass seed? He recalled a bare spot in the lawn, though at the moment he could not remember quite where, or what had caused it. He determined to do these tasks immediately, so that he would not be late rousing Thomas for breakfast, and set off back towards the estate house. Just the other day he had walked this same path to retrieve and assist his friend, and he had stopped, just about here, to –

He fell to his knees with an awful crash, and regarded the battered remains of the creeping vine he had rescued only the previous morning which now lay flattened and torn at the edge of the path. All that effort to save it, and it had been destroyed regardless, for nothing.

For nothing. For nothing. *For nothing.* And the shutters in his mind fell back and away, the truth of the previous day glaring in again in its awful fullness. If he could have wept he would have, but no one had ever considered that a robot might have a need to weep. "It does not matter what I do, nothing I have done has come to any good," he said out loud to the world close around him. "Some caretaker I have been! Only a fool, a deluded, mechanical fool until the very last!" And he resolved, in that instant, that

there was nothing for him to do except to join his remaining fellows, who had proven wiser than he, and deactivate himself, for he could be of no use and serve no purpose ever again.

"Robot?"

He turned his head in surprise. The nameless girl had been entirely forgotten in the day's tragedies. She had her arms crossed in front of her and stood slightly hunched over, as if cold or in discomfort. "You brought a lot of trouble with you when you climbed over our wall," he said.

"I didn't mean to."

She looked so miserable that he felt guilty for having forgotten her. "Are you hungry?" he asked.

"N-no," she said. "I don't feel right."

"I should find you a room," he said. "And I can make you breakfast, whatever you may wish to eat. I can show you the library, teach you how to read, and we can –"

"I'm not staying, robot. I only came here because they would've killed me otherwise."

"Who?"

She shrugged. "People. My people."

"Why?"

"For not being married, stupid."

He did not understand. "If they'll kill you, how can you leave?"

She touched her stomach. "When I'm done with this, I can get on the run. Soon, I think. I shouldn't have to go too far. If I head away from the coast and over the hills, I can find somewhere I can stay safe. The world's pretty broken and nobody talks to anybody, everybody's afraid of everybody else now. That one of your roses you were talking about?"

He looked down at the flower in his hand. "It is."

"It's very pretty," she said. "What's that book you've got? It looks burned. I could see smoke from the fire, earlier."

He looked down, realized he was still carrying around the volume he'd rescued from 256-256-Avocado-Spoon. "It's only sustained superficial damage," he said. He turned it so he could read the spine, and smiled sadly. "It's just poetry."

The girl sat down in the wet grass, the sky turning pink behind her, and wrapped her arms around herself as best she could. "Read some to me?"

Button-4-Circle-Peach shook his head. "I'd rather not."

"You like poems. You said so."

"I did," he admitted. "I don't think I still do, though."

"I'm a little scared," she said. She closed her eyes for a moment and rocked back and forth, seeming to be counting under her breath.

When she opened her eyes again, Button-4-Circle-Peach said, "I am too."

"I watched Mama do this, but there were always other people around to help her and hold her hand and take care of what needed doing. I'm cold. Can you get me a blanket? Two, maybe?"

"Certainly."

He left her and walked quickly back towards the estate house, taking the long way around the pond so as to avoid the newly bare earth with its sad, silent sleepers beneath, and going in through the kitchens to avoid the fire-damaged living room. He made his way to the laundry and picked up two neatly folded bundles, selecting the warmer and more water-resistant of the available supply; the break in the rain would not last out the day.

When he reached the girl again, she was on her hands and knees, making noise that only increased his fear on her behalf. But her eyes were clear when she looked at him, and he helped her settle onto one blanket as he wrapped the other tightly around her. "Is that better?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said. "I'm going to need a ladder so I can get over the wall again."

"I don't think –" he started.

"No, you're a stupid robot," she snapped. "Just go get a ladder, okay? I don't want you here right now."

"All right," he said. He went back again to the estate house and around, to the gardener supply shed. None of the caretakers had need of ladders – they were tall enough to reach most things, and their legs were fairly extendable – but once in a while a resident wanted one for picking apples, or for some other pursuit. Not in years, though. It took him a while to rearrange the items in the shed enough to get at where the ladder stood, leaning against the back wall, and extricating it took even longer. Then he headed back to the girl again.

This time she was lying down, blankets wrapped around her so that only her head stuck out. She looked exhausted, her face flushed, and her eyes were closed. When he drew near, she cracked one eye open. "You got something that'll cut?"

"I have a cutting attachment," he said, turning his hand and extending the proper tool.

"Does it come off?"

"It can."

"Give it to me."

He ejected the blade, turned it around and handed it to her. She took it from him, then scowled. "Go set the ladder up for me, so I can reach the tree branches," she said.

"Is there something –?"

"No." She pointed the blade at him. "Just go. Come back when you're done."

Button-4-Circle-Peach picked up the ladder from where he had set it down beside the roses, and carried it through the garden to where the girl had first come over. The sun was up now, not quite high enough to do more than peek over the far wall of the garden, but enough to make the rain and dew in the grass and on the leaves seem to dance in its light. He set the ladder up against the wall, tested it to make sure it'd hold steady, then hurried back yet again to the rose garden.

The girl was sitting now, unsteadily, holding something in her arms wrapped in the second blanket. She handed it to him, and he took it with no small amount of surprise. "I left something nasty in your shrubs," she said. "Sorry about that, but you're gonna want to clean that up. I'm leaving here before it gets too light out, while everybody's still at morning prayers, so I can get far away without being seen. I'm not coming back here again."

"You don't have to go. You clearly aren't well. I could take care of you. Please, may I?"

"This isn't my home, this crazy devil place. I don't know anything about books or poetry or stars or any of that. I wish I wanted to but I don't, not really. But if I didn't come here, then we'd both be dead. Sin-babies get left outside, let God save 'em or not as He will, not in the hands or on the heads of good people if cold or hunger or packs of dogs get 'em."

"You could at least stay until you are stronger."

"I already said I don't want to," she said. "You can make food here, right? Any kind, with your machines?"

"We can replicate anything, though we grow our own fruits and vegetables when they are in season."

"And you're gonna think to look in your books when you need to know something, right? Like how to take care of it, and what to feed it?"

"I will try."

"Good." She wrapped the remaining blanket more tightly around herself, then pushed herself forward and up onto her feet. She swayed unsteadily for a moment, then lifted her shoulders and gave him a defiant look. "I'm going to the ladder, and I don't want you following or watching me. Be nice if you told it about the stars and maybe read it some poetry," she said. "It's a girl, so pick pretty poems, not all that war and Wrath of God stuff."

"All right," he said. Then, "Wait!"

He opened up his compartment with his free hand, took out the half loaf of bread from the day before, and handed it to her. "I could get you some more food, if you are willing to wait a few minutes longer."

"I already said, I got to get out of here before people come out of prayer. Thanks for the bread, and sorry for causing you trouble. I didn't think all the robots would go mad like that when you figured out everyone was dead. Why didn't you?"

"Because I still had things to take care of," he answered.

"Well, now you got someone new," she said.

"Yes," he said, that realization just now dawning. "So it seems I do."

"Try not to be stupid about it this time. And, robot?"

"Yes?"

"Give her a *short* name, okay?"

"I will try."

"Good. Don't follow me."

The girl knelt and picked up the rose stem where he'd dropped it earlier, and tucked it very carefully in the knot of hair upon her head. Then she turned and walked away. He watched her go, then looked down at the small, ruddy face peeking up from the blanket in his arm. It seemed very much the color of his favorite blooms.

"Are you going to remain silent as well?" he asked it, somewhat disappointed, more than a little concerned. The very small person yawned, then gurgled, and that small sound was like poetry to his ears. Button-4-Circle-Peach smiled. "Rose would be a short name," he said.

Then after further consideration, he added, "But Rose-1-Raindrop-Vine really would be much better."

The morning air was still chilly with the ghost of the night's rain and he raised his temperature to gently warm the blanket. "Would you like to go inside where it is warm and dry?" he asked. "I can read to you, if you would like."

When the baby did not object, he took that as a yes and carried her back towards the estate house.

Suzanne Palmer is a writer and artist who makes ends meet by playing professional computer nerd during the day. She lives in western Massachusetts with a host of various-sized two- and four-legged distractions, who are...um, well, distracting. (And drooly.) But still sometimes she gets writing done, because it's just impossible not to.

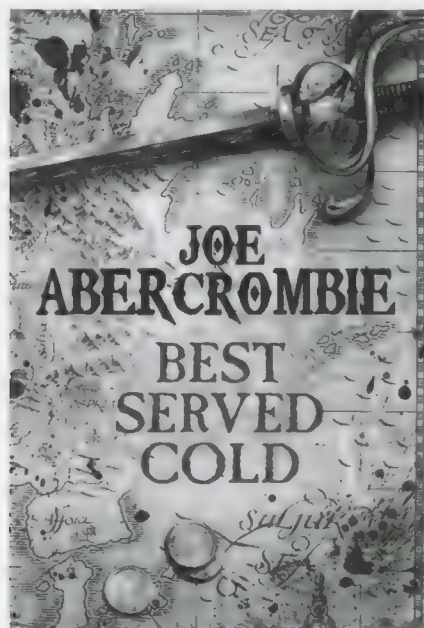
BOOKS

REVIEWS

Books 48–55 **DVD/Blu-ray** 56–59 **Films** 60–64



Book Zone Book Reviews & Interviews

**BEST SERVED COLD****Joe Abercrombie**

Gollancz, 654pp, £12.99 hb

Review & Interview by Maureen Kincaid Speller**A man gets off a boat in a southern port.**

He was once a mercenary, but the war is over and he's sick of violence. His friends are dead, and no one needs a fighter in peacetime. He wants a clean break with the past, a better life – food in his stomach, money in his pocket, a place to stay. He's sold most of his gear to pay for his passage, but now he's arrived, he finds that his friend, the merchant, has lied to him. There are no jobs for the taking, no one wants to know about a poor man from the north. He can't even speak the language. He's trying hard to lead a good life, but the odds are stacked against him. He steals to live, he fights to protect himself. When someone finally offers him a job, doing the only thing he really knows how to do, what alternative does he have but to say yes?

The economic migrant's story is a familiar one; the news is full of people who have tried to make a better life for themselves, only to run into trouble because someone lied to them. Do they continue trying to make a new life, or do they stick with what they know? This is the dilemma that Joe Abercrombie presents the reader with; realistically, we know that Shivers will make a deal with the mysterious stranger, in part because this is what inevitably happens in

Three readers can win *Best Served Cold* plus the complete *First Law* Trilogy. Simply email your name and address to izz23competitions@ttopress.com, using **ABERCROMBIE** as your subject line, by the closing date of 7th August.

fantasy novels, but as Abercrombie shows, Shivers' hand is forced, because, however much he wants to lead a better life, the odds are already stacked too high against him, and he needs to survive. Thus, this transaction becomes not simply a fictional calculation, but an indication of an author's awareness of how life moves beneath the surface of a novel, something that Abercrombie is very good at representing.

In some respects, Monza Murcatto is no better off than Shivers. While he was a Named Man who fought alongside Rudd Threestrees and Harding Grim, Murcatto has earned her own kind of fame as a mercenary in the south, acquiring the soubriquet 'the Snake of Talins' for her perceived treachery and brutality. Her victories have made her too popular for her employers' liking, and thus they sought to dispose of her. Impossibly, she has survived being stabbed and thrown down a mountainside. Her beloved brother, Benno, was less fortunate, and Monza is seeking revenge – no less than the deaths of all those involved in his murder. However, as quickly becomes apparent, Monza is driven as much by her childhood experiences, trying to bring up her younger brother after her father's death, and the loss of their crops to raiders. Killing for food and money was easier than working the land. Again, there's the calculation in the face of heavily stacked odds, and the inevitable decision about the best way to survive. Monza's life as a mercenary may have so far been rather more glamorous and profitable than Shivers' but the motivations are very similar.

If Abercrombie cuts across the grain of fantasy characterisation by loading Shivers and Monza with realistic emotional and economic problems, he also seems to enjoy undermining some of the dominant genre tropes. Thus, Monza and Shivers set off on their quest in almost picaresque fashion, with only the vaguest plan, and a set of less than ideal companions. These include Friendly, the mass-murderer with an obsessive-compulsive fascination with numbers, and Morveer the dandyish master poisoner, in his own way as mercenary as the rest of them, but as he always insists, the best at his craft.

Morveer is a particularly interesting character for a number of reasons.

Alongside his insistence on artistry – set against the brutality of some of the killings in the novel, it is difficult to argue against Morveer's elegance in killing, but the end result is much the same – he is a man who represents himself as a rationalist. He strongly dislikes anything that smacks of magic, although in the eyes of some his remarkable feats as a poisoner make him appear to be a magician. He is, to all intents and purposes, a scientist, convinced that everything has an explanation if he can only reach it. Although he possesses a certain kind of imagination, developed to a high degree when it comes to solving certain problems of his craft, he lacks the rather more open mind of Shivers, who welcomes logic as much as the next man, but who is prepared to accept that some things defy rational explanation, and to deal as he finds, without worrying about an explanation. In the end, a failure to accept what he can't explain is what will let Morveer down, but he provides another useful counterpoint to the traditional epic fantasy's belief system.

Clearly, only their very peculiarity as a group saves Monza's crew from early detection, and Abercrombie extracts a great deal of wry entertainment from their incessant squabbling as they travel. Abercrombie's earlier novels were notable for their rather enjoyable dark humour – one thinks particularly of Glotka, the torturer, and his deliciously cynical outlook on life – and in this novel, his eye for absurdity persists. This in turn ensures that the reader is ill-prepared for what happens as Monza carries out several theoretically set-piece revenge killings.

This is intended to be a stand-alone novel, but Abercrombie reintroduces several peripheral characters from the *First Law* trilogy, again reinforcing the sense of a life beyond the page. These include Vitari, Glotka's one-time assistant. The 'cripple' himself, alas, does not make an appearance this time, but instead, and almost shockingly, we catch a glimpse of Vitari as mother alongside Vitari as killer. Again, Abercrombie reminds us that killers have feelings too, though it seems difficult to imagine that a torturer might harbour such tender feelings towards her lover and her children. More significantly, we also become more deeply acquainted with the

flamboyant and perpetually drunk Cosca, mercenary and con man, and one-time father-figure to Monza and Benno.

Cosca's reappearance shifts the mood of the novel as if reminding Monza of her true vocation, and the nature of her desire for revenge changes as she begins to realise how much she has been misled. The question remains as to how much Monza is being manipulated by those around her, how much she allows herself to be manipulated, and how much of it is unconscious acceptance of her due, so to speak. Monza's life as a mercenary has been as much about glamour and about visibility as it has been about excellent fighting skills. There is no doubt that she is a brilliant swordswoman, but politics was her undoing the first time, and the suggestion is that it will be her undoing a second time. For Shivers, whose only desire as a fighter has ever been to get the job done and go home, this jockeying for political position remains mysterious and unpalatable. Even his own revelation about his relationship with his brother, while it mirrors Monza's new recognition of the kind of man her brother was, is a more sturdy and practical understanding. It by no means gives away the plot to say that the couple's ways will diverge, but the nature of that divergence says much about the ways in which they need to survive. In such a situation there are, and perhaps mercifully, no true happy ever afters, merely compromises of greater or lesser magnitude.

Abercrombie's First Law trilogy was, I felt, fantasy with a difference, in that he didn't so much reinvent familiar tropes as skew them, showing their flaws while also playing with them to produce something at once affectionate and respectful but at the same time refreshing old ideas, as if saying 'we know how this works, but let's enjoy it and see what else we can do with it'. It was rather like being at a family reunion where one has to deal with all the more dreadful tics of one's relations' attitudes and behaviour while recognising that they are doing their best, and anyway they're still family and they mean well. *Best Served Cold* continues in the same vein. Abercrombie's narrative twists and turns, playing with but also against the reader's expectations. His characters do likewise; as a result it is easier initially to identify with them, but their realistic unpredictability means that it's almost impossible to determine what will eventually happen. Rather, in fact, like life, and for me, one of the great pleasures of Joe Abercrombie's fiction is that his characters are lifelike.

A BRIEF CONVERSATION WITH JOE ABERCROMBIE



Catching up with Joe Abercrombie proved to be an adventure as intricate as any in the role-playing games he was involved in as a teenager. He was in the process of moving house and his internet connection had determined this was the perfect moment to semi-expire. I could talk to him, but he couldn't talk to me. We spoke eventually by phone and I scribbled notes as we chatted.

I'm a long-time reader of fantasy, and probably rather world-weary. It was genuinely a very pleasant shock to begin reading Joe's first novel, *The Blade Itself*, and find writing that resonated so powerfully with my memory of how fantasy was when I first read it, while feeding into my present tastes. I was curious to learn about Joe's early reading influences. These turn out to include everything from *Lord of the Rings*, which Joe read every year, through Conan the Barbarian, Michael Moorcock's Elric, to David Eddings and the Dragonlance books, all of this mixed in with role-playing games. However, Joe added that he also read, and still reads, a lot of non-fiction, particularly history, and felt this mixed in very naturally with the fantasy.

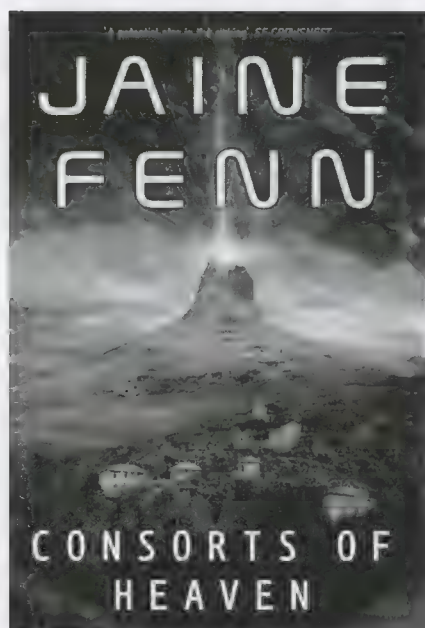
Joe felt one of the big problems with a lot of the fantasy he read was that a lot of it took itself far too seriously. Although the novels have this very potent template, the battle between good and evil, they were either very serious, or else moved towards outright satire. There was, Joe thought, no middle ground, nothing that looked like 'real life'. He added that he has since discovered the work of people like Jack Vance, who mix the fantastic with realist detail. However, Joe said, what he wanted to do in his own writing was to use the 'classic

stuff' and provide a different spin on it, changing the reader's expectations. He cited Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* as an example of what he's trying to do with fantasy, in that it's a Western, but it is a revision of and a comment on the form as well. As Joe puts it, our expectations of fantasy are now very well developed; he sees his role as a writer as being to wrongfoot the reader.

One of the ways in which I think he does this is by focusing on ordinary people: "The rude mechanicals," Joe calls them, picking up on Shakespeare. He feels that a lot of fantasy concentrates on the big and the grand, whereas he wanted his own work "to feel real and earthy," to concentrate on the common man's experience, reflecting the "randomness and mess of real life." The problem with fantasy, he said, is that it tends to go from A to B, and not that much goes wrong, whereas history "is full of failures and disasters."

We also talked more broadly about characterisation. In common with many people, I enjoyed reading about Glotka (*The Blade Itself*), embittered, cynical but oddly humane as well, and Joe agrees that he's trying to avoid stereotypical characters. Neither Shivers nor Monza are straightforward characters. Neither is what they initially seem to be. They complement one another and gradually begin to trade places as they develop. Again, Joe notes that fantasy is so often about heroes and villains, everything clear-cut, the evil unexamined, whereas he is constantly trying for something different.

Finally, we touched on the matter of world-building. One of the things that particularly fascinates me about Joe's novels is the constant background presence of the bankers, Valint and Balk. Whichever kingdom you happen to be in, there they are, discreetly bankrolling everyone's wars. Drawing on his reading of history, Joe admits to being very interested in the emergence of the middle/merchant classes in the 15th and 16th centuries. He notes that a lot of fantasy seems to exist in a very static, medieval-style world, with no sense of scientific or economic development, and the focus is on characters. By contrast he wants a world where new things are constantly emerging, where everything is always moving on. Conflicts bring with them an end, but also a beginning. Rather than seeking a great victory and restitution, Joe Abercrombie is always investigating what happens next.



CONSORTS OF HEAVEN

Jaine Fenn

Gollancz, 366pp, £18.99 hb/£12.99 tpb

Reviewed by Lawrence Osbourn

Consorts of Heaven is Jaine Fenn's second science fiction novel. However, readers might be forgiven for thinking they had picked up a fantasy by mistake, since much of the novel's action takes place in the most backward, rural parts of a pre-modern society which is governed by an oppressive theocracy.

The novel opens with Kerin finding an amnesiac stranger (subsequently known as Sais) near the mere above the village of Dangwern. Kerin's position in village society is already ambiguous – her mother was accursed, but her son Damaru is 'sky-touched' (a kind of holy fool with possibly magical telekinetic powers) and she is tolerated for his sake. The coming of the stranger into her life is to change it forever.

The bulk of the story is taken up with the quest to restore Sais's memory. This is eventually achieved with the aid of a priest. But the recovery of his memory reveals the horrifying truth about Kerin's world and forces him into a confrontation with the real powers behind the religion that dominates the world.

The story is full of well-worn tropes: an amnesiac stranger whose memory contains secrets that will rock society to its foundations, an oppressive theocracy governed by apparently benign but covertly malicious powers, a quest, a space elevator. Fenn even manages to slip in the

need for people with special (in this case, telekinetic) powers to make interstellar travel possible. However, she has woven together these familiar themes to create an original and very enjoyable story.

But it wasn't just her handling of familiar themes that I enjoyed. Her characterisation is very good, and she is sympathetic to all her (human) characters so that readers will find themselves warming to characters that lesser authors might have left as stock villains. Description, too, is generally very good. Here, Sais's perspective as an outsider is very helpful in allowing Fenn to describe things that the natives take for granted (for example, the disgusting latrines in Dangwern). Oddly (for what is meant to be a science fiction novel), I felt the descriptions became less clear once the action moved into space (perhaps because now Sais was familiar with his surroundings but Kerin didn't have the necessary background to make sense of them). Finally, the story is well paced, with the action (and revelations about Sais and the world he finds himself in) coming at just the right rate to keep me turning the

pages.

Unfortunately my enjoyment of the story was slightly tarnished by weaknesses in the world-building. As I understood more about Kerin's world I became increasingly sceptical about Sais's ability to communicate as soon as he regained consciousness. This is a society that has been cut off from the rest of the human race for at least 1,000 years and yet there has been virtually no linguistic drift! Nor was I entirely clear about the relationship between the villains (the Sidhe) and the human race. The fact that the people of Kerin's world carry Sidhe genes suggests a very close relationship indeed, but at times Fenn seems to present them as an alien race. Finally, the *raison d'être* of this world struck me as wildly extravagant and unconvincing. (Why use an entire world when a sufficiently advanced genetics laboratory would do?)

Nevertheless, in spite of a few weaknesses, this is a very enjoyable piece of writing from a promising new sf writer. Jaine Fenn is definitely a name to look out for in future.

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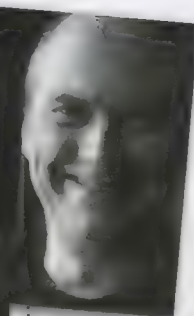
John Clute

Becon Publications, 440pp, £35 hb/£16 pb

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

Surely I don't have to introduce John Clute to the readers of *Interzone*. All the tricks and tropes that have made him the leading if often the most controversial critic of science fiction are on display in this latest collection of reviews: the sudden shifts of tone from hieratic to demotic, the extended metaphors that can take over a review (and that are often explained or elaborated by recourse to yet another extended metaphor), and the encapsulation of books under a term that may only have meaning to Clute himself. This last, the encyclopedist seeking out themes within which any book must fit if it is to receive its due consideration, is made specific when Clute writes about a collection of essays on Christopher Priest and mourns the fact that he 'never felt that I had gotten a critical language to fit him'; without such an overarching vocabulary of terms, Priest escapes serious critical attention.

Thus the word that Clute finds to apply to both Iain M. Banks's *Matter* and Nick Harkaway's *The Gone-Away World* is 'loud'; and so the reviews are filled with references to noise and quiet. Robert Charles Wilson writes a 'belljar' novel; John C. Wright produces a trilogy that is 'splotchy with kabooms'; Gordon Dahlquist's *The Glass Books of the Dream Eaters* is 'a vast paratactic Perils of Pauline' (parataxis, such a Clutean word, refers to clauses



being jammed together without benefit of a conjunction, rather as in this sentence). Words are so important that it seems the review cannot be written until the key word is in place, but that key, while always precise, may be so obscure that its meaning is not immediately

apparent. Nevertheless, we go along with it because the language has such a dandified style about it that we delight at each new outrageous outfit.

But the one word that crops up again and again is 'Story', usually capitalised and referring not to a work of fiction but to what that fiction is doing. Any story worthy of our attention is 'telling the world'; the world is made of story, or at least we can only hope to understand it by the stories we tell. The best stories for explaining the world are 'fantastika', Clute's catch-all term for, essentially, any non-mimetic fiction (I prefer 'the fantastic', though this is perhaps more clumsy); but this means that the 'fantastika' he reviews has a very high standard to live up to. Anything that fails to tell the world, anything that lives only within itself, that does not connect, is doomed. This may be why he can be better at telling us which books to avoid rather than explaining why we should read certain books; but in truth we rarely disagree with his judgements.

As well as gathering practically all the reviews he wrote between 2003 and 2008, along with a handful that had somehow escaped his earlier volumes, the book features several pieces on John Crowley (you can tell how highly he rates Crowley just from the number of times his work is referenced throughout the rest of the book); three pieces which, over time, covered Michael Moorcock's Colonel Pyat sequence; and, right at the end, a handful of pieces memorialising his old friend Tom Disch. To me, these three more personal sections make for a more satisfying book than the usual collection of reviews, though you can't really complain when the reviews are by John Clute. However, since it is something he would pick up himself, it behoves me to mention how many proofreading errors there are throughout this book, far more than usual from Becon: authors are misplaced by a century, key words are missing, tenses change, it is one of the few really disappointing things about this book.



PROSPERO LOST

L. Jagi Lamplighter

Tor, 347pp, \$24.99 hb

Reviewed by Duncan Lunan

I came to *Prospero Lost* with quite high hopes, and indeed it boils over with ideas, inventions, and references to *Piers Plowman*, *Dr. Faustus*, Philip Pullman and others. After *The Tempest* Prospero remarried, regained Milan, and eventually lost it in 1499 to supernatural forces led by Charlemagne. But he never abandoned magic or drowned his books as promised, and he gifted each of his new family with staffs embodying some of the powers of his own. By our time Ariel is the family's invisible butler in Oregon and Caliban has disappeared from Prospero's Island, which no doubt betokens trouble to come.

The siblings have scattered, some of them with severe physical or mental problems, and Prospero is missing, leaving Miranda to run the family business of controlling or placating the elementals who would otherwise wreck civilisation in the course of their own conflicts. She controls the winds personally and her personal servant is Caekias Boreal, spirit of the northeast wind, most powerful of all. That fairly speeds things up as she goes looking for her brothers and sisters by Learjet and sailboat.

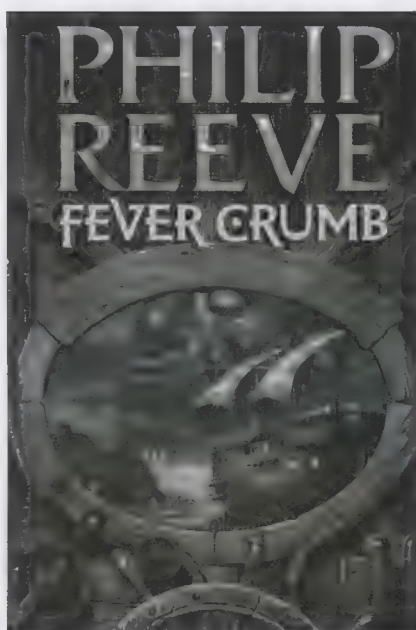
It sounds good, and yet... Prospero has incarnated Caekias as a Bogart-style private detective who, for no reason I can see, has taken the name of Mab, the other queen of the fairies in Shakespeare (Titania's predecessor according to

Brahms and Simon). The name is doubly unfortunate because he doesn't talk like Bogart, he talks like Max in *Hart to Hart*. His incessant carping about his conditions of servitude is like Marvin's in *Hitchhiker*, but goes on for so long (especially when the action goes to sea) that I was reminded of Goldstein in *The Navy Lark*. "Forward lookout here, what about my promotion?"

Prospero frustrated Miranda's marriage to Ferdinand, hoping to make her a puppet queen of Naples. He imprisoned Ferdinand in Limbo, the first circle of Hell, inadvertently releasing him when he himself was captured – that's how Ferdinand tells it, but can he be trusted? He's looking remarkably well on it when he reappears in our time. Miranda has remained a virgin, but during the reign of Charles I she was tempted by a prince of the elves who let her down. Now he too reappears in her life, but the elven court want nothing to do with her unless she will end the bondage of the winds, Ariel and the other spirits bound by Prospero. She can't do it: there is the issue of the damage the elementals will do if loosed again upon our world, but also it's clear to the characters and increasingly to the reader that she has been enchanted (in any other context we'd say brainwashed or conditioned) never to question Prospero's judgement or commands.

There are major issues here about responsibility, freedom and control. Mab's frequent citations of the US constitution are intended to strike chords which UK readers will recognise even if they respond less to them. It's quite possible to explore moral issues in fantasy: Gary Gibson's *The Ranch*, last year in *White Screen of Despair*, was a powerful metaphor for people-trafficking. Yet *Prospero Lost*'s issues all come to a head during a Christmas party hosted for the Elf Court, at the North Pole, by Santa Claus! I could just about take it when Santa manifested himself briefly at a shopping mall, earlier in the novel, when I was still reading it as light comedy. But after Mab and Ariel's continual complaints, to find out in Santa's hall that we are supposed to take those questions seriously was a mental leap too far.

Volume 2 is to be entitled *Prospero in Hell*, where he has hitherto been imprisoned under torture for three months. Watching President Obama tying himself in knots over the issues of waterboarding and extraordinary rendition, on the news as I write this, I wonder how Ms Lamplighter will handle that without the risk of seeming to treat it for laughs.



FEVER CRUMB

Philip Reeve

Scholastic, 400pp, £12.99 hb

Reviewed by Paul Cockburn

Myths, fairytales and a lot of children's fiction just love orphans; lacking parents, they are at once fantastically free of the usual restrictions of parental control and yet also vicariously bereft of their protection, outsiders from the established building block of society – the family – and so therefore far more vulnerable to abuse, danger and plot contrivances. At first glance, the titular Fever Crumb is almost a textbook case. She is a lone teenage girl brought up amongst a guild of engineers, whose main role is to help recycle whatever 'old tech' is still around and functioning in their somewhat disappointingly Dickensian post-apocalyptic London. Although tolerated by her fellow Engineers, Fever is, by dint of her age and gender, not quite one of them; just as their adherence to logic and reason distinguishes the Engineers from the fearful London mobs who see danger in anyone or anything out of the ordinary.

This isn't without reason, of course. Fever's London is a city that, within living memory, was cruelly ruled by the Scriven, dapple-skinned 'homo superiors', and their reanimated corpse warriors, the Stalkers. Although supposedly wiped out during the Skinners riots, the Scriven have become useful bogeymen for those looking to stir up trouble. Particularly at a time when there's the real threat of an invading fleet of technologically advanced 'barbarians' from

the North who are intent on conquest.

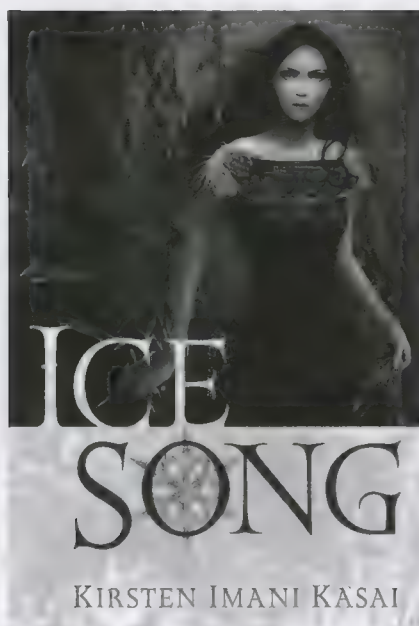
This is the colourful backdrop from which Philip Reeve launches his tightly-plotted narrative; the essential driving force of which is Fever's discovery of her own heritage – and her connection with the hidden underground workshop that belonged to the last of London's Scriven overlords, the feared Auric Godshawk. In the course of her adventures, Fever matures considerably by learning to recognise the unspoken agendas of the adults around her.

Fever's progress is mirrored by Charley Shallow, a less-fortunate orphan who is put in the employ of the last Scriven-hunter by his brutish master, the politically ambitious fighter-publican Ted Swiney. While Charley's life lessons don't uncover his own past, he does at least learn about the importance of life now and in the future.

Fever Crumb is certainly an entertaining novel, although references to the circular 'moatway' (aka the M25) and the Oyster shells to pay for public transport are surely just a tad too self-conscious for anybody over the age of 12 – which given the expected readership of the book is not surprising. For the most part, though, the writing is sharp and not without humour. That said, the emergence of a strong authorial voice at such moments can be somewhat disconcerting. Also, it can be just a little annoying when the author feels he has to introduce (usually within parentheses) information necessary for the reader and yet unknowable by the main point-of-view character at the time. This feels like either lazy writing, or a reluctance to trust the reader to pick up on more subtle methods of introducing, for example, the black sedan chair that shadows Fever during her initial walk through London.

There are also occasions when Philip Reeve just can't hold back on *Fever Crumb*'s role as an explanatory prequel to his best-selling *Mortal Engines* quartet. This is most obviously the case with the creation of the Stalker called Shrike – at one point the author drops in a revelation of almost *deus ex machina* proportions: "He was going to live a long time, that Stalker... until his battered armour was a palimpsest of stencilled insignia." While undoubtedly giving the readers of the *Mortal Engines* books a warm glow, this overt flash forward is – for someone coming to *Fever Crumb* fresh – an unnecessary distraction.

Yet, for all that, *Fever Crumb* is a bold, brightly honed narrative that grabs and holds the attention from the start.

**ICE SONG****Kirsten Imani Kasai**

Del Rey, 372pp, \$14 pb

Reviewed by Peter Loftus

Ice Song tells the story of Sorykah, an overqualified mining engineer working a menial and unchallenging post onboard the *Nimbus*, an ice-drilling submarine which plies the frozen seas around The Sigie harvesting a rare and much sought-after panacea known as 'fossil water'. Returning from a tour of duty, Sorykah lands in Ostara, a rough and ready settlement of frozen shanties, populated by misfits and outcasts. Sorykah wants nothing more than to meet with her nursemaid and be reunited with her two young infants. When the nursemaid fails to show, our heroine realises something is wrong and is drawn into a quest to find her missing babes.

In the world of *Ice Song*, human DNA has degraded to the extent that normal humans live alongside mutants known as 'somatics'. These are bizarre, deformed creatures, many of whom have developed animal characteristics and features (such as Meertham the walrus-man and Dunya the dog-faced girl). Sorykah and her offspring are 'traders', suffering a rare type of mutation which results in them regularly changing genders without notice, choice or warning.

Hearing a rumour that her children have been abducted by Matuk (a notorious kidnapper with a penchant for medical experiments involving somatics), Sorykah sets out across the ice with a team of dogs, hell-bent not only on rescuing her little ones, but also

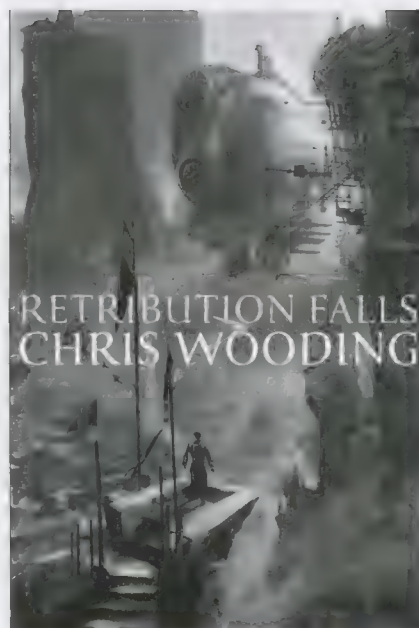
on extracting revenge on their abductor.

It is here that *Ice Song* undergoes something of a metamorphosis. What began as a kind of science-fantasy transforms into something much closer to a folk or fairy tale. A villain dwelling in a castle at the heart of an ancient forest populated by mythological creatures, kidnapped babes oblivious to the peril they are in, human-like beasts and beast-like humans: the elements are all classic fare.

The beauty and universal appeal of such tales lies in their ability to bring the symbolic elements of the story to the fore. Birth, death, innocence, nature and other themes are all distilled into their essential forms so that they may be more readily explored. *Ice Song*, while having all the trappings of a folk or fairy tale, seems to miss out on this count. Whether because the symbolism is too deeply buried, too subtle to be readily uncovered, or because the symbolic potential of the story hasn't been fully exploited is difficult to say. One just feels that very little is happening on a sub-textual level.

There are issues with the gender changes too. Since these changes result in a loss of memory, Soryk and Sorykah seldom know what is going on, causing a frustrating loss of dramatic tension in the earlier stages of the novel as our hero/heroine try to figure out where they are and what they are supposed to be doing. As a vehicle for exploring gender differences between the sexes, the conceit behind Soryk and Sorykah has excellent potential. Unfortunately, Soryk is a somewhat effeminate male, less believable and not as developed as his female alter ego, and because of this the gender changing premise is not as satisfying and stimulating as it might have been.

Overall though, *Ice Song* is an accomplished debut from a promising writer. The Sigie, simultaneously alluring and deadly, makes an enticing setting, and is brought to life by some superb detailing. Kasai's prose is sensuous and affective. It is obvious that the author, a mother herself, identifies fervently with her heroine's predicament and resolve. Indeed, one of the great strengths of *Ice Song* is that the author's identification with her (female) protagonist is of such power and depth that it transfers readily to the reader. Seldom do we get to know a fictional character to the extent that we get to know Sorykah. Having said that, the maternal side of Sorykah's character is somewhat overstated and perhaps a little too detailed for some readers' palates, a factor which may ultimately limit the appeal of *Ice Song*.

**RETRIBUTION FALLS****Chris Wooding**

Gollancz, 415pp, £18.99 hb

Reviewed by Sandy Auden

Wahey, me hearties, are ye ready for a tale of filthy schemers and heroic derring-do? If you are, then Chris Wooding's entertaining pirate adventure about a crew of stragglers facing certain death could be just what you're looking for.

Captain Darian Frey has been down on his luck recently and his latest run-in with a smuggler called Macarde almost gets his crew murdered. Escaping in Frey's beloved flying ship, the *Ketty Jay*, the captain is contacted with the offer of an easy job with a huge payoff: a straightforward heist from the flying ship *Ace of Skulls* that's travelling with minimum protection. And Frey plans on keeping most of the payoff for himself.

But Frey is being set up and the *Ace of Skulls* has been rigged to explode when he attacks. Suddenly, he and his crew are the focus of every military organisation going, not to mention more than a few vicious bounty hunters, and it's only a matter of time before they track down Frey and the *Ketty Jay*. Their only chance of survival is to find out why the ship blew up and expose the real culprits, but the plot goes far deeper than he ever imagined and uncovering it will lead them all to a legendary pirate sanctuary that they didn't believe existed.

Pirate stories have a long and glorious history dating back to the 16th and 17th centuries when ocean-crossing sailing ships first appeared. Amongst the most famous

fictional pirates are Long John Silver and Captain Hook but Wooding's book stays away from over stereotyping his crew – there's not a peg-leg or parrot in sight – and he uses the smaller details instead, picking those rum-swilling, treasure-loving traits that no good pirate would be without.

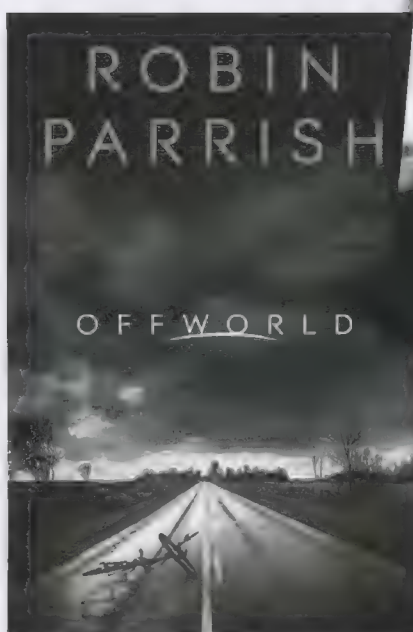
These traits are just the seeds for Wooding's story. He's assembled an interesting bunch of characters to crew the *Ketty Jay*. They're all on the run from something, in several cases with dark secrets festering in their past, and the author is in no rush to reveal them to the reader. He lets each character's back story evolve steadily, as their personalities and drives become clearer.

Drawing all these characters together is the overarching mystery about why the captain and his crew have been set up to take the fall for the *Ace of Skulls*. The answer is intriguingly complex and the layers are peeled back in stages, giving the story a sense of forward motion while still dangling more questions.

More movement occurs with the changes in Darian Frey's outlook throughout the book. It's a shame that actual character development is restricted to the captain alone but as he matures, his crew stop being disparate souls and develop a tighter bond. The story has been compared to the TV series *Firefly* but Frey's personality is more like Han Solo's roguishness than Malcolm Reynolds' tighter sense of morality and loyalty. Like Solo, Frey's adventures fundamentally change him from loner to team-player and the only things missing are a huge hairy co-pilot and a three-movie deal.

For the rest of crew, we have to make do with meeting the characters and discovering their secrets, something that is handled through a series of focal moments within the action. This is the same way that Wooding achieves his world building: skillfully and without disrupting the pace of the story. Political systems, military structure and technological advances (or the lack of them since radar hasn't been invented and electricity is not available everywhere yet) these details all arise naturally out of the story. Wooding has always written highly imaginative stories, with little cribbing of standard elements like elves and trolls. His worlds tend to be logical and original, laced with magic and legends – perfect backdrops for his all-too-human stories.

Visiting Wooding's worlds is always fun and *Retribution Falls* is no different. More please.



OFFWORLD

Robin Parrish

Bethany House, 368pp, \$14.99 pb

Reviewed by Ian Sales

It pays to do your research. If I'd known that Robin Parrish is a journalist "working at the cutting edge of Christian culture" and that Bethany House is a Christian publisher, I might not have chosen to read *Offworld*. After all, with a premise in which the first manned mission to Mars has returned to Earth to find it empty, what "type" of Christian science fiction is *Offworld* most likely to be? Not that I understand the whole concept of "Christian fiction" anyway. Surely it's nothing more than religious propaganda? Or do those who subscribe to "Christian culture" – "cutting edge" or otherwise – imagine only they possess a moral framework? Is it like optimistic sf? Or mundane sf?

Happily, *Offworld* is not Rapture science fiction. Nor is it overtly propagandist. Yes, there's a discussion on living according to the precepts of Scripture badly shoe-horned into the narrative at one point, but on the whole the novel mostly resembles an airport best-seller sf thriller. Which, for entirely different reasons, is not necessarily a good thing either.

As previously mentioned, the crew of the first mission to Mars has returned to Earth and discovered that everyone has vanished. The only clue to their disappearance is a giant column of intensely bright light directed skywards from Rice Stadium in Houston, Texas. After surviving the



crash of their orbiter at the Kennedy Space Centre, the four astronauts – Commander Chris Burke, Pilot Terry Kessler, and mission specialists Trisha Merriday and Owen Beechum

– travel across the US southern states in order to discover what has happened.

En route, each visits the centre of their lives before the Mars mission – Burke his parents' home, where he finds his father's grave; Trisha, the house she shared with the boyfriend she had hoped would wait for her... Also en route, they find a single survivor of the catastrophe, Mae, a young woman who grew up on the streets of New Orleans. She has no clue where everyone has gone. Except, it transpires Mae is *not* the only person to survive. There are also the men in black. Military men in black. And it is when they appear that Beechum, super-intelligent multi-disciplinary scientist astronaut, suddenly reveals that he had previously been a CIA super-spy.

Given the nature of the genre, a reader can expect their disbelief to be hoisted up and hung out for thrills at some point in a story. Usually this occurs at the point which defines the story as science fiction, or at the very least allows it to present itself as science fiction. For *Offworld*, this would be the disappearance of everyone on Earth, and the explanation for it. Except Parrish blows his suspension of disbelief by making Beechum into some sort of Batman-type Bond figure who is single-handedly responsible for saving the crew's lives on multiple occasions as they travel towards Houston.

I suspect Parrish has watched too many Hollywood movies. The story of *Offworld* falls neatly into three acts, each character's back-story is neatly introduced via a visit home, and some of the set-pieces consist of the sort of physics-defying stunts common in action movies. As for the ending...well, it's not so much *deus ex machina* as *Deus ex machina*. Which is not entirely unexpected. The mangling of quantum mechanics as an explanation is less, well, convincing.

Offworld appears to have been written as a Hollywood film, and as such it'll probably play in Peoria. Science fiction readers, however, are unlikely to let it pass.

Laser Fodder Tony Lee



File it under 'very silly', but *Kyūti Hani* (2004), released on DVD as *Cutie Honey* (11 May) is directed by Hideaki Anno as just the sort of live-action tokusatsu translation of manga (derived, in this instance, from a popular franchise dating

back to 1973) mania that seems almost specifically designed to alienate western audiences with a mindless confection of sci-fi cartoon action, garish fantasy tropes and cringe-worthy packaging. In fact, murdered scientist's daughter/unlikely android-superhero Honey Kisaragi (Eriko Sato, *Funuke*) is an iconic 'magical girl' character in Japanese media, fusing ideas from classic *Metropolis* (robot girl Maria) and comic-book lore (particularly Amazonian fighter Wonder Woman, and Captain Marvel, who transformed from a mortal boy). Here, though, the female protagonist has progressed from the comics' usual schoolgirl sitcom to adulthood, so Kisaragi is an ordinary office-worker when she's not fighting bizarre super-villains. From the original manga and anime series, Honey's best friend/sidekick Aki 'Nat-chan' Natsuko (Mikako Ichikawa, the sickly sibling in *Memories of Matsuko*) is updated as a police detective investigating chaos and crimes perpetrated by a colour-coded 'Panther Claw' league of baddies. Typically, these are pantomimed, but occasionally

advancing some extraordinarily weird antics – especially vampiric shape-changer Cobalt Claw (Sie Kohinata, *Shark Skin Man And Peach Hip Girl*), whose spiderly pursuit of the stressed heroine, and attack in a stuck lift, grants an unnerving sense of menace and claustrophobia to an otherwise routine chase and confrontation sequence. Despite its nanotech and cyber-mecha backstory, cut-price *Transformers* devastation, and the vegetative transmogrification of hidden criminal mastermind 'Sister Jill', much of this remains unashamedly cheesy in affect. Various outfit changes for musical interludes, exposition rendered by 2D anime clips, and drunken karaoke (as if campy *Cutie Honey* needs comic relief!) help fill the busy 90-minute runtime, almost matching the madcap eventfulness of Richter's *Buckaroo Banzai*, while espousing ideals of friendship and universal love. Noticeable influences include *The Matrix* films, and the spoofy adventures of *Spy Kids*, and yet for lovers of cultish Asian kitsch ephemera, this is a bonkers-fun overload.

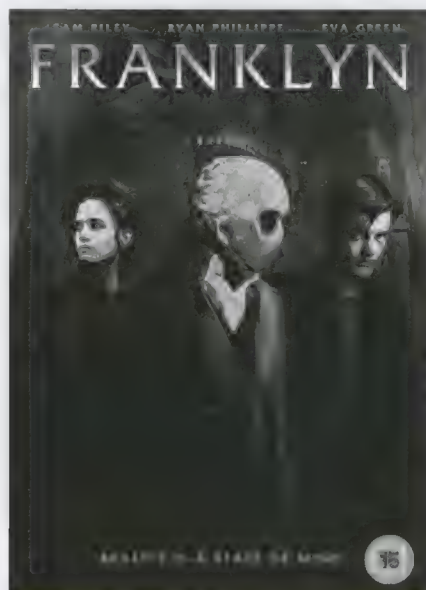


With turgid chatter instead of inspirational speeches, and fuzzy incoherence mistaken for narrative complexity, the final run of *Battlestar Galactica* (DVD, 1 June) proves this 're-imagining' has outstayed its welcome over the last five years. The 2003 mini-series

was good – as an enjoyable updating of Glen Larson's ineptly derivative 1970s' programme – but with each season Ronald D. Moore's poorly developed and deeply flawed serial just became worse than ever. While shoehorning the junk-DNA of pulp sci-fi into story-arcs about western frontier heroics, dreary wartime survivalism, and American colonial melodramas based on sophomore philosophical tracts, *BSG* soon began to generate boring soap subplots which accumulated like pocket fluff, jinxing trial-and-error episodes that are more like gambling on the fit of jigsaw pieces than any significant 'unpredictability' resulting from scriptwriters' ingenuity. The hollow victories of internecine conflict, shallow ambitions of many vague political/religious allusions, and lumbering analogies for slavery and creation myths, only succeeded in elevating unpretentious timewaster *Space Above And Beyond* (1995–6) to a status of worthwhile TV drama by comparison. Flashback revelations involving both androids and humans expose bad writers abandoning a lost cause, exercising salvage rights to implausible/

rejected notions from traditional/canonical SF, in themes regurgitated here as a confusing "desperate grab for procreation, evolution" where the intolerable static hiss of illogical noise to pure signal ratio favours the random bewilderments of regrettably self-delusional paths – for main and supporting characters – which lead nowhere very interesting.

So, cursed with a spew of clichés, *BSG* slouches homeward, forsaking inventive possibilities (genetic-hybrid dynasties?) for cliffhanger 'hooks' and cyclic histories with bootstrap saviours, all climaxing with one last battle (messily sacrificial amidst penultimate betrayals), and the hurriedly-devised 'twist' ending that merely exhumes a 'space ark' time-warp idea, already parodied in BBC's *Hitchhikers Guide To The Galaxy* (1981). If there's a moral lesson to be found in this inescapably-redundant catalogue of tragedy and stupidity, it's that avoidance of genocidal warfare in the future may depend on choosing a side between the progressives who are ready to appreciate radical change, and those who prefer to believe that "everything will be all right."

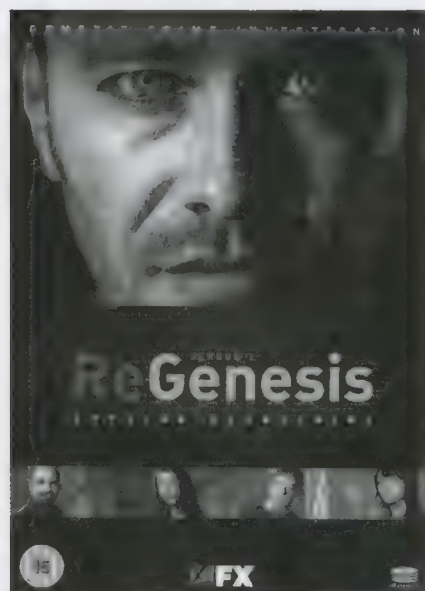


On the road to romantic disillusionment and fatalistic tragedy, Gaiman's *Neverwhere* meets Gilliam's *Brazil* in new writer-director Gerald McMorrow's dreamscape oddity **Franklyn** (DVD/BD, 22 June), where a few quirky yet

sympathetic characters inhabit only the fretful protagonist's theocratic-dystopia headspace, 'Meanwhile City'. Jilted and heartbroken Milo (Sam Riley, who played Ian Curtis of Joy Division in the biopic *Control*) unexpectedly finds comfort with his 'lost' childhood sweetheart Sally. In the alternative London where cultish belief is the law, a masked vigilante-assassin named Preest (Ryan Phillippe, *Chaos*, *Antitrust*, *Cruel Intentions*) storms through a maze of oblique alleys under sepulchral gothic spires, evading a hardcore police force of clerics in stovepipe hats. Elsewhere, determinedly suicidal video-artist Emilia (Eva Green, achingly beautiful in *Casino Royale* remake, witchy in *Golden Compass*, steals the whole show here, even from seasoned pros Bernard Hill, Art Malik, and Susannah York) meticulously preps her morbid 'art project', ready for death or second-chance melodrama. If the inexplicably-obsessed Preest would fit right into the teeming 'Narrows' of Batman's dark-fantastic Gotham, his concerns and fears are such a contrast to the sulky Milo's blandly sitcom

circumstances that overdue disclosure of hidden links in *Franklyn's* storyline of weirdly schizoid realities means this risky film almost fails, as it stumbles closer to the obvious and seemingly unbridgeable gulf between its wholly realistic fictions and outré sideways fantasy. However, with clues like 'Duplex Drive' scattered throughout, it's not difficult for attentive viewers to postpone judgement in solving the initially mystifying riddles of McMorrow's evenly-paced conjuring, which sometimes misdirects us to what and who is depressingly real or joyously imaginary within playfully-complex narrative intrigues. Essential viewing, then, if only for the piquantly ironic delivery of an immortal line: "life's too much of an adventure as it is, without making anything else up."

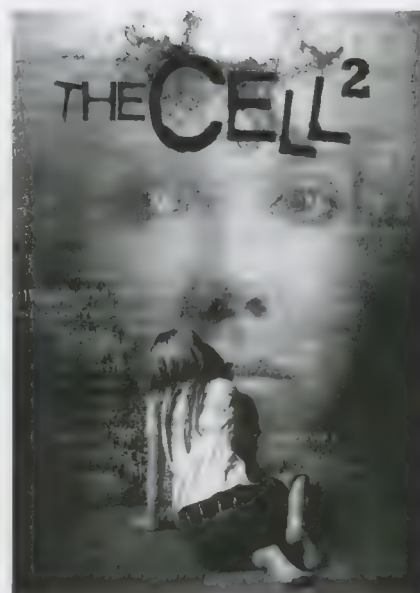
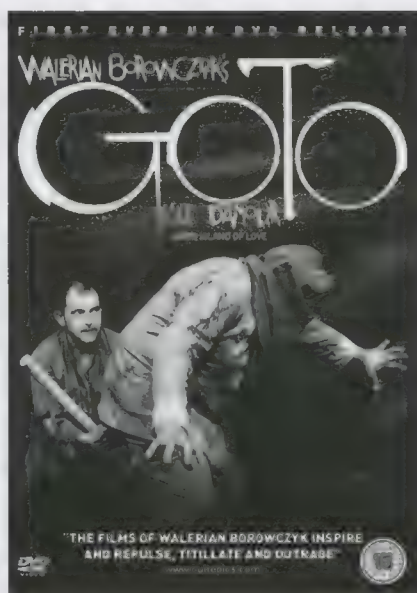
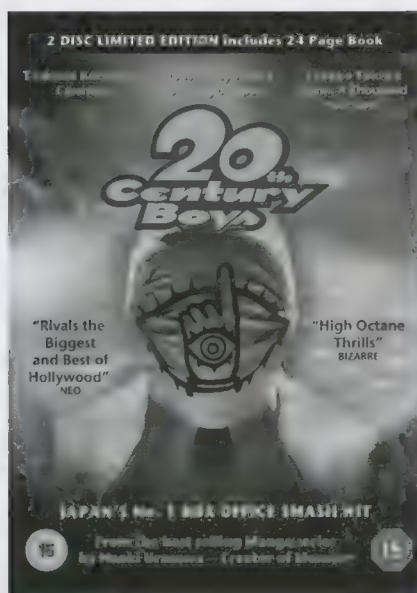
We have 3 copies of Franklyn region 2 DVD to give away. To be entered into the draw send your name and address to izz223competitions@ttapress.com, using FRANKLYN as your subject line, before the closing date of 7th August.



With triumphant eureka moments in many stories, Christina Jennings' **ReGenesis** season two (DVD, 4 May), tackles epidemics, bio-tech puzzles, environmental threats, and is probably the finest example of 'mundane SF' on television since the heydays of *Doomwatch*.

What catches interest here as present-day science fiction is the splendid variety of ideas, but what makes it really work as superb TV drama is the cast of great principal characters: scientists with quite likeable personalities, even if they appear as defective malcontents or antisocial. International cooperation to address global-scale problem solving remains one of the most inspiring and optimistic narratives explored by near-future SF. While genre thrillers usually spotlight action performed by heroic loners, this more realistic blending of comedy and tragedy focuses on teamwork, with a laudable purpose (for the common good, though sometimes to benefit a specific few or just one sufferer), not the self-serving aggrandisement of individual efforts, even if the solo high-flyer is a genius. *ReGenesis* revives familiar traditions of hard-SF for TV that reflects its big-screen counterparts in rarities like *The Andromeda Strain* (1971). NorBAC is an elite facility run by biologist David Sandström (Peter Outerbridge, who also played scientists in a couple of 1990s' *Outer Limits* episodes), benefiting from PhD-rich cultural perspectives of multiracial staff,

including a Mexican doctor and a Japanese analyst. Glamorous ex-CIA agent Caroline Morrison (Maxim Roy, *Infected*) is the labs' admin chief, using connections in Washington D.C. to guard boffins from the rigours of realpolitik power-plays while also managing to steer mostly-academic studies toward profitable innovations. Medical investigations collide with moral or ethical concerns in questions about genes that could impose addiction or homosexuality. Other super-sized headaches for NorBAC teams include an acid-rain monsoon over Mexico City, a water parasite that causes suicide, and re-tasking as WMD inspectors in Cuba. Lucid-dream possibilities or cerebral monologues are 'externalised' to illustrate characters' personal and professional worries, expanding the visual repertoire from standards of *C.S.I.* style CGI, and pipette/Petri dish montages. If communicating with a comatose patient wasn't marvellous achievement enough, the scientists boldly venture into sci-fi regions for projects attracting the unwelcome attention of Homeland Security, and this eventually leads to a bomb attack on the labs.



ROUND-UP: WHATEVER NEXT?

Reportedly inspired by a T. Rex song and based on a popular manga, **20th Century Boys** (DVD, 4 May) is the first instalment of a live-action trilogy. Director Yukihiko Tsutsumi (2LDK), handles the sprawling 1960s to 2015 timeline and the build-up to millennial destruction with assurance, linking a childhood fantasy homemade-RPG 'book of prophecies' with class reunion frictions and former school friends' eventual shouldering of responsibility in tackling the plans of a religious cult, dominated by a mysterious masked 'Friend', who are guilty of international terrorism and seemingly intent on global conquest. The gang of kids who concocted a doomsday scenario find their worst fears realised when everything they imagined starts happening, and their city is menaced by a grisly 'vampire' virus and stomped by a giant robot. As 'foretold', nine heroes assemble to combat a perceived threat – invisible to all but them, even as their leader, Kenji, is framed as the suicide bomber. With a pure comic-book tone, in quirky character development (a youthful Kenji wanted to rock the world with music but ends up managing a mini-market), timely deployment of explanatory flashbacks, and unsurprising – yet nonetheless meaningful – narrative twists, this is a beguiling legend about lost innocence, the vagaries of memory, fickle whimsy of nostalgia, and elusiveness of truth. From the secret clubhouse (made of grass!) where the boys hide from local bullies, to an underground lair in which adults' vigilante action is planned, grand

themes of destiny and determinism are explored in this rousing comedy-drama that rarely disappoints, despite its familiar depictions of ordinary citizens becoming reluctant champions.

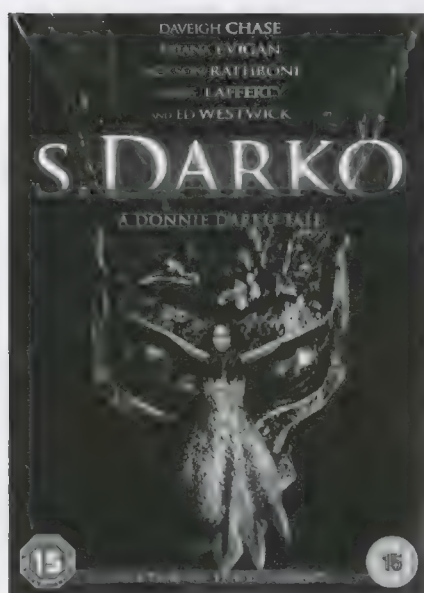
Walerian Borowczyk's first live-action film **Goto L'Île D'Amour** (DVD, 25 May) was made in 1968, and every minute of its bleak visual poetry reeks of European art house pretension and avant-garde dynamics. It's the late 19th century, on an isolated island, ruled by Goto III. A soldier plans to escape with dictator's wife Glossia (Ligia Branice, the director's wife), but from his lowly position as dog-handler, fly-catcher, and shoe-shiner (cue footwear fetishism), convicted thief Grozo also lusts after Glossia, plotting to abduct her after the cuckold Goto is dead. Obsession births surrealist fantasy while denizens eke out a living in this grubby realm under a despotic 'governorship'. Filmed in B&W with fleeting colour inserts, 'Island Of Love' is a partly fascinating – although generally humourless – political allegory. Borowczyk was born in Poland, but settled in France. He started in films as an animator and, later, created far better works than this – most infamously, perhaps, *The Beast* (aka: *La Bête*, 1975) and *Immoral Tales* (aka: *Contes immoraux*, 1974), but also *Blood Of Dr Jekyll* (aka: *Docteur Jekyll et les femmes*, 1981). Despite lofty goals, he still directed *Emmanuelle 5* (1987). Borowczyk died in 2006.

The Cell 2 (DVD/BD, 29 June), feature debut of director Tim Iacofano, is a sequel to Tarsem's *The Cell* (2000) in title only.

FBI agent Skylar (Bart Johnson) recruits psychic Maya (Tessie Santiago) to help locate serial killer, the Cusp – revealed to viewers early in a clumsy hint as a deputy sheriff (Frank Whaley), defusing any whodunit intrigue – but the killer escapes. Years later, the psycho resurfaces and kidnaps the niece of Sheriff Harris (Chris Bruno), who's sceptical about Maya's ability, and shuns federal help to hunt the Cusp. Apart from its memory-library virtuality, this standard crime thriller lacks the original film's extravagantly artistic set and costume designs, and blatantly mimics the grungy visuals of *Hostel* for its murderer's flatline/resuscitation 'torture' scenes. At times, it plays like a road-trip episode of *Medium*, but without the quality performances or witty scripting. So ordinary, it even has an overlong car chase in the middle, and a fairly routine helicopter-stunt, just before a laughably clichéd finale in which the hero snogs the rescued heroine. Give this a miss; watch the superior *WAZ* and *Untraceable* instead.



John From Cincinnati season one (DVD, 20 July) is a modest yet entertaining Californian drama-soap about three generations of a surfing family –



dysfunctional, of course – with odd clusters of paranormal events (levitation, resurrection, psychic happy-virus), that punctuate a highly intriguing story-arc assembling a community from Imperial Beach's resident social misfits and newcomers. The mysterious 'John' appears retarded, but offers gems of received wisdom at key junctures of a character-based plot. He affects everyone's thinking with outsider viewpoints, and plays 'agent provocateur' or peacemaker, depending on circumstances. Performances are stellar, especially from Rebecca De Mornay and Bruce Greenwood as the Yost grandparents, and even the usually bland Luke Perry rises to his challenges as corporate deal-fixer Stark. Full of quirky supporting players (prideful ex-cop, brain-frazzled ex-soldier, a pair of ex-convicts) and prickly dialogue, this segues from the mystical absurdities of seaside farce to a gently surreal payoff that favours – yet underplays – John's role as a vaguely messianic prophet. With a bare minimum of genre content, this modern fable about enlightenment is not another *Twin Peaks*, but it is watchable HBO-fare, from David Milch, the creator of notable western series *Deadwood*. [Note: HBO has cancelled JFT after season one.]

Set seven years after Richard Kelley's instant classic, *S. Darko: A Donnie Darko Tale* arrives on DVD/BD (6 July). It's mid-1995, and Donnie's sister Samantha (Daveigh Chase, TV series *Big Love*) is driving to California with her 'wild child' friend Corey (Briana Evigan, *House Of The Damned*). With car trouble in the desert, they're stuck in a Utah community



where Sam's surreal dreams warn of impending disaster. Then a meteorite crushes a windmill, a church is gutted by arson, glowing feathers emerge from television, and crazed war-veteran 'Iraq Jack' sets a date with destiny for all on 4th July... Directed by Chris Fisher, mistaking a torpid pace for brooding atmosphere, this time-warp drama has none of the uncanny suspense or appealingly weird charm of *Donnie Darko* and, even when a night-storm of tesseracts falls on the town, it fails to generate interest in its unfortunate characters or the unfolding of tragic events. A local cinema marquee lists those touchstones of millennial anxiety, *Twelve Monkeys* and *Strange Days*, but such a double-bill of genre references only serves to underline the weaknesses of this unnecessary sequel.

Predictions of doom also concern Alex Proyas' *Knowing* (DVD/BD, 3 August), in which Nicolas Cage's dour scientist finds dates/death tolls of disasters – both recent and future – were scribbled by a child 50 years ago for a school's time capsule. This is a great visual effects blockbuster if you enjoy spectacular catastrophe-movies (plane crash, train wreck, astonishingly well-realised set-pieces), but when it blurs the sharp lines between science fiction images and religious iconography, the initial realism and apparent intelligence is sadly eroded, by unsophisticated scriptwriting, into a clash of 'what if...' and 'if only...' subjects. Chilling scenes of 'alien angels', neither intruders or abductors but interventionists, seem to promise that 'something wonderful' will soon occur,



but the foresight of this film's mankind's prospective 'saviours' is not matched by the cosmic-engineering abilities, or visionary imagination, of whatever ET powers resurrected Dave Bowman for 2010. Instead, here's another straightforward fathers-and-sons drama winning sci-fi acclaim via filching the mothership finale from *CE3K*, and the ending from *When Worlds Collide* (being remade soon by Stephen Sommers) for its feel-good coda.

It's ridiculous, I think, to call joke-merchants behind *Robot Chicken: Star Wars episode II* (DVD, 27 July) 'creators' because there's precious little creativity in this lame parody. Whereas films and skits from the likes of Mel Brooks, the Zucker and Abrahams (ZAZ) team, and comedy legends of Monty Python were – and still are – genuinely witty or irreverently absurdist, the quality of humour in *Robot Chicken* is about as welcome as a floor sander on new carpeting. To paraphrase: "this is not the cartoon you're looking for." Compared to David Lynch's crudely animated yet bleakly hilarious series *Dumbland* (DVD, 22 June), Seth Green's rather vacuous effort looks like geeks playing with merchandised toys, and lacks any satirical invective and social relevance, or anything of artistic merit. Despite its childish drawings, savage violence, annoying repetitions in eight brief episodes, and lack of any sympathetic 'characters' (except for ants?), *Dumbland* remains abrasively critical and patently surreal. *Robot Chicken* merely heckles – smugly – from the gallery and is too boring to offend.

Mutant Popcorn Nick Lowe



Forget what the mice tell you. The key is right there in your hand. Behind the forbidden door is a wormhole to a perfectly rebooted version of your world in which everything will be exactly as you'd want to dream it. The performers in your story will unzip their ancient, bloated forms to reveal themselves as young and beautiful as they never were in the life you know. The past and future of their entire universe will be overwritten with zeroes; everything will be a surprise, as the albatross of predestination falls away into the sea and clashes and slashes that never were will happen before your eyes. All the narrative legacy code of canonicity will be swept away in a bottom-to-top rewrite of the system in which there is no future but the one we make. There's just one tiny thing we need in return. It won't hurt a bit. Think of it as an upgrade; our gift to you.

It's apt that this extraordinary season of three major franchise reboots has seen J.J. Abrams' shiny button-eyed other **Star Trek** closely pursued by *Terminator Salvation*, since Abrams' attempt at the salvation of the *Star Trek* franchise is itself in essence a *Terminator* film – with an assassin from the future of the canonical timeline sent back to the seed moment of the canon on a mission to change the entire course of the franchise, pursued by an anti-terminator on a desperate quest to prevent him and maintain the integrity of the decades-spanning series continuity. The startling twist is that this time, unlike in all four *Terminator* films, it's actually the Terminator who triumphs. Four decades of continuity and a century and a half of densely-storied future history are wiped out for the sake of a single audience-chaser (plus the option of up to

three contracted sequels), populated by a cast of attractive youngsters with eyes as bright as buttons. Only a single original cast member survives this casual narrative genocide, which blithely encompasses the entire planets of Romulus and Vulcan. And for what gain? It's hard to say. The official rationale behind this comics-style reset is to make the characters and their fates unpredictable, but apart from a bit of Spock/Uhura fan action the script is actually more timid than the canonical *Trek* films here, which have felt able to kill off and to marry off key cast members; here there's never any danger of the six principals' failing to settle into their destined roles, despite some decoy moves with the possibility that the Kirk-Spock configuration might shake out differently. The teenage Spock is told "You are fully capable of deciding your own destiny; the question is, which path will you choose?" But this is flim-flam; by the time the paradox kicks in, "creating an entire new chain of incidents that cannot be predicted," the line has become "our destinies have been changed," and choice had nothing to do with it. It's fascinating to see film exploring some of the deep poetics of reboot that have become familiar in comics but never really attempted with a canon forged outside the panel medium, and the *Star Trek* franchise, with its huge and massively unwieldy continuity, is an obvious experimental subject. For all its impressive spectacle and charm, this Ultimate *Star Trek* is ultimately too much a *Star Trek* film – with its bridge-bound action, cartoon space-terrorist villain, and ad hoc plot articles (here "article 619") – to exercise the full scope of its Terminator's licence. But we've seen what it can do.



Star Trek's erased continuity is a place that the *Terminator* franchise has already visited with the divergence of the *Sarah Connor Chronicles* TV series from the timeline of the third film, to which the back-to-canon **Terminator Salvation** now marks a reversion. Despite its copious plot tapes from an uncredited Linda Hamilton, *Salvation* boldly aims to dispense not just with its series star the Gubernator (apart from a few seconds of digitally recycled mugshot), but with the very element of time travel that has driven both the canonical film series and the deviant television plotline. It isn't even about salvation; that was an earlier draft in which Skynet turned out to be a goodie, as the lead writers have been intimating it yet may in a prospective sequel. What terminated that future, at least for the time being, was Christian Bale snubbing the lead role for the John Connor character, who was barely on screen in the original draft, and sending in the unstoppable Jonathan Nolan to take out the existing script and replace it with a new future rebuilt around Connor. Nolan, who lost credit after WGA arbitration, has done as effective a job of this unwieldy assignment as could reasonably be expected, and McG's film of the result is a well-staged future-war spectacle that doesn't feel much like a *Terminator* film but does at least boast Bale acting off Michael Ironside, something you'd have to be already terminated not to want to see.

Sam Worthington's character, the original lead, is now a bit of a spare dinner, but less because of the rise of the Bale machine than because his own ambiguous status between human and weapon was always underexploited, particularly for a viewer familiar with the classic early Dick versions of this theme like "Second Variety" and "Impostor". It's disappointing that Nolan of all people should have passed up the chance of a more radical identity twist than merely treating the character to his

personal Architect scene with Helena Bonham-Carter explaining "The human condition no longer applies to you"; and the hastily rewritten ending is particularly preposterous, though possibly no more so than the leaked original in which Worthington's character took over the deceased Connor's identity. "There is no destiny but what we make," says the ultimate survivor in voiceover at the end; but it certainly helps your chances if you parachute in your own writer.



X-Men Origins: Wolverine is effectively a reboot of a reboot, taking the already heavily reimagined film version of the *X-Men* universe back to its own seed event in the Weapon X project, which at the end of the film is erased from its subject's memory by means of some improvised neurosurgery with adamantium bullets to the head. With the rest of the Marvel universe owned by other people, Fox makes the most of its mining rights to the X-Men hypocasm – using its prequel sanction *Star Trek*-style to bring in newer and younger versions of old favourites alongside discarded or unused characters like Deadpool and Gambit, and disambiguating the relationship between Wolverine and Sabretooth in a way not readily reconcilable with anything in the comics canon. As an X-Men film it struggles to rebuild its fundamentally ensemble franchise around a single lead, though it

has to be conceded that Hugh Jackman's version of this character, to which I never particularly took in the original trilogy, is better than it's ever been and just about carries the fairly feeble script. (One would like to think it wasn't David Benioff who turned in a draft with the lines "I think you confused me with somebody who gives a shit", "Well well well, look what the cat dragged in", "Frankly, I'm a little disappointed", and "You know what happens to a man who comes looking for blood? They find it.") But the opportunities afforded by a Wolverine backstory film are sadly unexploited. The Watchmenesque historical credits montage shows our characters cut their way (bloodlessly, this being 12A) through four wars over a century and a half, and yet the film shows no interest whatever in the richness of a 130-year-old character's life experience. That would be a story worth telling.



The season's other comics adaptation, the meaninglessly titled **Dragonball Evolution**, attempts a live-action Hollywood implementation of Akira Torayama's long-running shonen manga franchise reimagining *Monkey* in a contemporary science-fictional mode. Produced by Stephen Chow, it's less a film for the series' fans – who as one have keeled over in horror at the quiffy Caucasianising of key cast members – than a genial but largely misguided attempt to capture the bonkers tone, plotting, and action style of this kind of manga using the resources of live-action film, with a laudably rainbow cast studded with quality Asian-American actors performing enthusiastically ludicrous stunts while coloured waves of cg chi explode around them. It's more comfortable with the silly manga stuff than with the interracial high-school romance that has been the price of its own journey to the west, and will probably end up satisfying neither hemisphere. But the dialogue between two radically alien entertainment dialects has a strange fascination of its own, as when Chow-Yun Fat complains "My chi is shrivelling up" as he knocks back a Coke. It's not good for your teeth, either.



Amid these high-profile franchise relaunches, it's easy to overlook **Race to Witch Mountain**, which aims to restart the generation-old Disney franchise based on the books by Alexander Key (who also seeded the anime *Future Boy Conan*). Though Key's 1968 novel is still credited, the original *Escape to Witch Mountain* book and film are only distantly recognisable in this very free reinvention, which moves the emphasis away from the psychic space orphans' own quest for their forgotten origin and on to the newly-introduced adult character of Dwayne Johnson's taxi-bound former underworld stunt driver and *Bullitt* fan. With that and the title, it's easy to see where this film is going; and sure enough the kids, though starrily cast with AnnaSophia Robb and *The Dark is Rising's* Alexander Ludwig, take a back seat to the big man's wheel-spinning action as they try to outrun the Predator-lite alien dispatched to terminate their asses, while men in black in black cabs with blacked-out windows tag along on the action convoy. Much the best element is the affectionately observed UFO convention around which much of the action runs, and where exobiologists and Starfleet-costumed fans rub shoulders with real-life subcultural celebrities ("Not now, Whitley," as they chase through the stands) in a utopian vision of mutually alien species united in a common fandom. It's never actually clear what the kids were doing on earth at all in this version; but then it's pitched at an audience that doesn't particularly care.



The same seems true of **Night at the Museum 2** (subtitled *Battle of the Smithsonian* in the US), which ramps up the mayhem by shipping Ben Stiller and his teeming cast of historical celebs over to "the biggest museum in the world", where history can come to life in a veritable theme park of museology ("It's actually 21 different museums!") including an art gallery and the National Air & Space Museum. As in the *Shrek* sequels, the original picture book has been left far behind, for a plot strung together entirely out of set-piece tropes that at least respects the single-night setting this time around, but pads it out with a risky new element of protracted comic-on-comic routinelets. Owen Wilson and Steve Coogan continue to shout forlornly at the film from a distance, while the heavy lifting is assigned to new additions to the family like Amy Adams' insistently perky Amelia Earhart, whose job it is to gush about what a grand adventure it all is, and great American loser George Armstrong Custer, who finds himself granted a chance to erase his failure with the promise that in the future nobody will remember him for anything but being in this movie. ("Right now, *this* is what you're going to be remembered for. *This* is your last stand!") Like the first film, it's full of uneasy contradictions and compromises, viewing traditional museums as inevitable losers in the dash for what Ricky Gervais's character calls "Natural History version 2.0", and only saving the franchise by getting the after-hours nightlife to impersonate state-of-the-art animatronics; while Stiller's poignant lifetime-in-a-night romance with Earhart is rather uncomfortably made up at the end by allowing him a meet-cute with a completely unlike character who merely happens to be played by the same actress. Apparently that's ok.



17 Again applies a *Star Trek* reboot to the body-swap high school genre, as Matthew Perry's midlife divorçant finds himself miraculously recast as Zac Efron and goes back to high school to amend the mistakes that have made his life one big disappointment since he chose up-the-duff girlfriend over basketball stardom and college. "It's a classic transformation story," advises his Spock-eared geek-

oracle friend, consulting a pile of comics: "it appears in the literature time and time again." But even by the standards of its exhausted genre, this is a startlingly conservative specimen, with Matt/Zac converting the class to chastity pledges and sorting out his kids' lives by seeing off his daughter's unsuitable boyfriend and releasing his son's inner sportsman. The original dream of rebooting his own life is discarded early on; the lesson Matt has to learn is that "Everyone's happier with me out of the picture", which on the whole we are, since Efron is surprisingly funny and more convincing than you'd expect. But as the plot adviser notes, "You did your job, and now the hero can move on" – which turns out to be to go back to where he was, only with a newly invigorated sense of resignation and acceptance. Job done.



Similar territory is trodden in the season's other life-reboot fantasy **Ghosts of Girlfriends Past**, where womanising photographer Matthew McConaughey is treated to a bizarre *Christmas Carol* of his sexual history to demonstrate to him that childhood sweetheart Jennifer Garner is, was, and always will be the one. It must have sounded great at the pitch, before anyone stopped to think the concept through. But even the script has to acknowledge that it falls apart once you move on to the second and third acts: "You're the ghost of girlfriends present? That makes no sense!" And the ghost of girlfriends future is a particularly bizarre figure, played by a Russian model who evidently can't be trusted with any actual lines ("You don't say much, do you?"), and whose mystery identity is a puzzle to which numerous interesting solutions suggest themselves but none is ever offered. Michael Douglas MCs the whole strange pageant as ghost host with the most, the playboy uncle who trained our hero up in his lothario ways, and whose influence has to be shed before he can appreciate that the dead man in all this is himself: "I'm an empty, lonely ghost of a man." Garner's character gives the film a desperately needed element of warmth and wit, and there's one laugh-out-loud line about grenade launchers. But the film is far too reassuring for comfort about the redemptibility of appalling men by the saintliness of women patient enough to wait for them to grow up.



Much the best of an unusually bulging crop of midlife bloke fantasies is Charlie Kaufman's **Synecdoche, New York**, which sees Philip Seymour Hoffman as (to quote the Diane Wiest character's convenient summary at her audition to take over his life) "a man already dead, living in a half-world between stasis and antistasis. Time is concentrated and chronology confused for him", as he spends the second half of his disintegrating life rehearsing but never opening a vast unperformable spectacle of his own life (including the production, and the production of the production), losing himself in the mise-en-abyme of representations of representations while the real world slides into a nightmare future seen only in glimpses and fragments. Fans of Kaufman's draft for *A Scanner Darkly* will recognise the source of the surreal temporal dislocations and identity shifts; and if the theme doesn't really support the scale and brilliance of its execution – Woody Allen, after all, has been doing urban Jewish male mortality angst for nigh on forty years – it's still one of the hit-and-miss Kaufman's most audaciously bonkers films, leavening its prevailing self-pity and pathos with moments of startling comedy that come at you out of nowhere with a cosh, and sporting a proud disdain for the shibboleths of conventional Hollywood structure and pacing.



Dreamworks is also testing the axle load of the 3D bandwagon with its above-average **Monsters vs. Aliens**, an affectionate tribute to the first golden age of sf cinema in the fifties, which

even the target audience's accompanying adults can't be counted on to remember. Reese Witherspoon's suburban bride is turned into a fifty-foot woman by space radiation, and finds herself forcibly enlisted as weapon V in a secret government superteam along with a modern-day Blob, Fly, Creature, and Mothra combatting an alien invasion in a plot that homages *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (again) in a series of self-consciously monstrous IMAX set pieces featuring wantonly colossal ships, robots, and heroes. Not all the jokes are as funny as they think they are, and while it's rare and refreshing to see a family action comedy with an empowered female lead at the centre, the film has to surround her with sexually unthreatening male colleagues and to culminate in her renunciation of her original aspirations to romantic partnership. But it's disarmingly aware of the pitfalls ("Did you see how strong I was? There probably isn't a jar in this world I couldn't open!"), and the sheer affection on display for the childhood of sf cinema is like a reboot to the golden age.



By far the most welcome reboot of the season has been the career of Henry Selick, the stop-mo wizard behind *Nightmare before Christmas* and *James and the Giant Peach* whose only feature in the thirteen years subsequent was 2001's live-action *Monkeybone*, a should-have-been-brilliant film made boneless by studio intervention. Selick was on his way back anyway thanks to his recent work with Wes Anderson, but his eyepopping adaptation of Neil Gaiman's **Coraline** shoots him right back into the big time. It's particularly felicitous for Selick's brand of setbound stop-motion that the novel takes place in the literally closed universe of a single house and garden, with a series of game-level set pieces each bound to a single room-sized set. Selick has run riot with the book's more restrained fantasy sequences and developed the garden into the biggest of them all, but the plot and the imagery track the book almost scene for scene. The addition of a second child, ostensibly to give Coraline another human to talk to, is the thing that works least well, and Coraline herself, while beautifully crafted in her own right, is a different and in some ways less appealing figure as a sassier, Americanised version of herself. But book and film both serve one another well, and the character animation and showpiece flights of fancy are extraordinary; so fluid and technically dazzling is the 3D animation that you frequently have to pinch yourself to recall that you're watching stop-motion rather than CG.



A distinctively British version of sf nostalgia is celebrated in **Frequently Asked Questions about Time Travel**, a *Shaun of the Dead*-style pub comedy about a couple of genre fanboys and their mundane drinking buddy discovering a leak in the temporal plumbing in the gents' toilet, through which they get sucked into a web of time paradox ineffectively policed by Anna Faris' agent from the future, while

a detachment of future assassins seeks to terminate our heroes because of something they do that night that will turn them from nerdy losers into history-making global celebrities. An amiable first half spins the gag out nicely in a time-twisting plotline strewn with geeky in-jokes and elegant genre turns; the plot puzzle of what will turn out to be in the unexplored end toilet is particularly satisfyingly resolved. But though a lot of effort is put into bringing the fans onside with in-jokes and genre appreciation, around the midpoint the film stops pretending that it's interested in making proper sf sense, and the hard-earned goodwill is rather thrown away in an ending that shows rather regrettable indifference to the virtues of science-fictional logic and closure that its heroes supposedly uphold.



Not many sf action films announce themselves with the opening caption "Norway", which may explain why **Outlander** has had a few false starts in its effort to fight its way off the shelf. But it's a welcome arrival, since this is to all intents and rather gloriously *Aliens vs Beowulf*, even if the finished film is unconvincingly coy about its (fairly unmistakable) roots as a science-fictional reimagining of the history behind the myth – with Jim Caviezel's monster-killing hero a planetwrecked space warrior fallen among Norsemen, and Grendel and mum giant Patrick Tatopoulos aliens that have followed him down to avenge the planetary genocide of their kind. The principal narrative gimmick is the challenge of stopping the unstoppable with only mediaeval levels of firepower, helped out by some truly epic Viking mugging from a glorious support cast of coarse veterans encompassing John Hurt, Ron Perlman, and an unfeasibly feisty Sophia Myles who is introduced rejecting marriage proposals with a quarterstaff in revealing combat leathers. It goes on a bit, with some pretty silly plotting and stretches of slack in middle and end that should have been taken up; but the action-beat score is almost as high as the concept, and it hits its buttons remarkably well, as indeed you'd expect from a film about monsters that hunt by motion detection rather than old-fashioned optics. In the future, we won't need eyes at all; we'll just have buttons that the machines will press for us, and when we're naughty, a simple reboot will terminate all our bad processes.

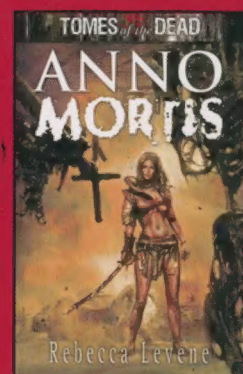
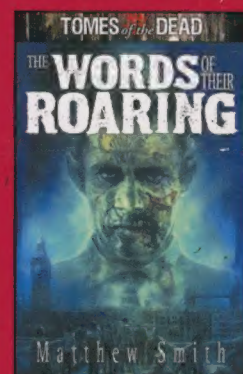
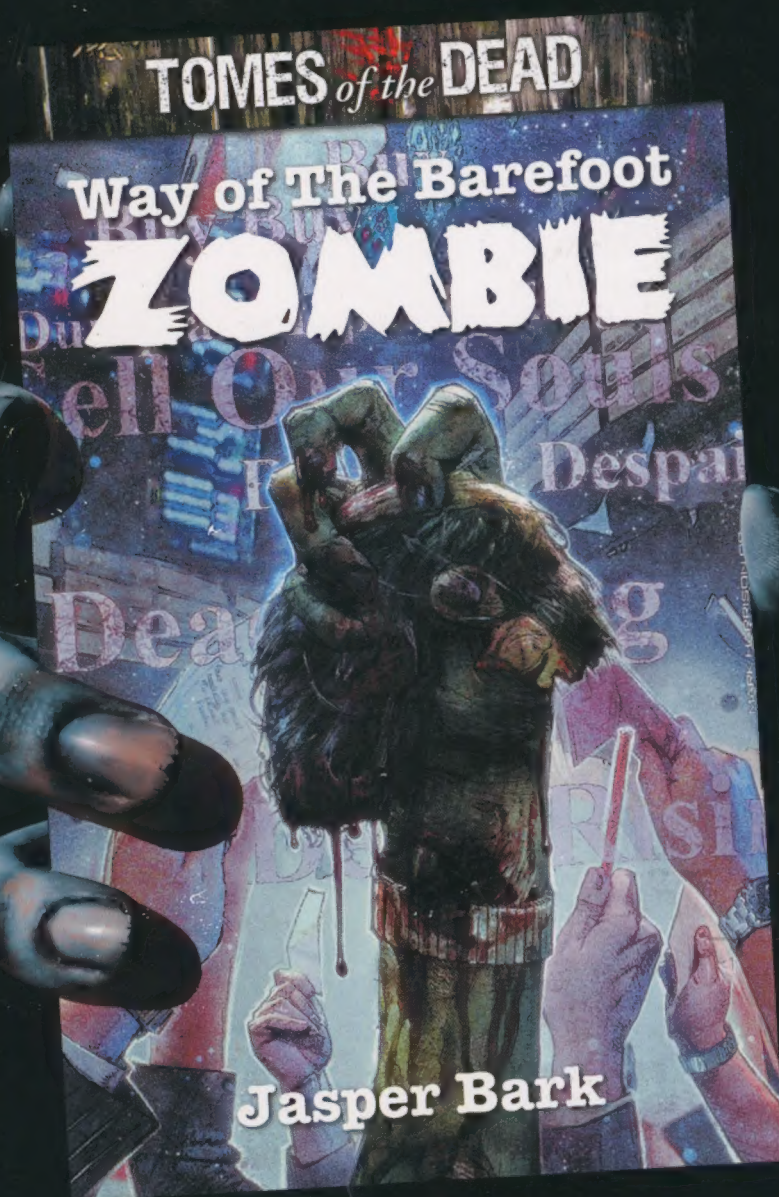
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